My Big Sister Lives in a Fantasy World

6

HUMANITY'S EXTINCTION ACTUALLY HAPPENS THIS TIME WITH THE EVIL GOD'S REVIVAL?!

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Illust. An2A

Ryoma Takei
A Divine Vessel host. He's saved girls in a variety of worlds in his capacity as "Protagonist."
"BIG BROTHER! WHO IS THIS PERSON?"
Ende
A Worldview Holder who reads destiny in books.
It all happened so suddenly that Ryoma had no chance to protest.
"Hey!"
Miho froze up at the sight.
Chapter 2: It's Been a While, So Let's Try to Get These Stories Straight
My Big Sister LIVES IN A FANTASY WORLD
6
HUMANITY'S EXTINCTION ACTUALLY HAPPENS THIS TIME WITH THE EVIL GOD'S REVIVAL?!

"HELP ME!"
"WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?"
YU
"TSK!"
Aki Takizawa
A young office worker-type who carries around blood-stained scissors.
Monika Sakurazaki
A Worldview Holder, from whom Yuichi originally acquired Soul Reader.
Yuichi Sakaki
The world's strongest little brother, trained by his detached-from-reality big sister.
Yoriko Sakaki
Yuichi's little sister, with a severe brother complex
Monika's scream echoed throughout the alleyways. Before long, a girl and boy came around the corner, arm in arm. Above the girl's head was the label "Yori," and above the boy's head was the label "Yu."
Chapter 4: Let's Finally Talk About Yuichi's Spring Vacation
THE TRUTH ABOUT SOUL READER, FINALLY REVEALED?!

Chapter 7: Looks Like Punching Will Solve This After All
"I'M THE EVIL GOD'S INCARNATION. IN HINDUISM, THEY'D CALL ME AN AVATAR."
"BY THE WAY, DID YOU KNOW THE TERM 'AVATAR' TO DESCRIBE YOUR CHARACTER IN A VIDEO GAME REFERS TO THE SAME THING?!"
"NOBODY CARES!"

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Prologue: Natsuki Takeuchi Runs Away

Natsuki stood in the empty room with her uniform on.

She had gotten rid of everything as part of putting her affairs in order, but she had never had much in the way of possessions to begin with.

She had taken up her identity of Natsuki Takeuchi a year ago.

She had begun living in this place at that time, but since she knew she would have to leave someday, she hadn't bought much to put in it.

It was a three-bedroom apartment; quite large for someone living alone. It should have been for a family, and in fact, she had stolen it from some family named Takeuchi that had lived there at some point.

Natsuki had never met the Takeuchi family that lived there before, and she didn't know what had happened to them. She had purchased Natsuki Takeuchi's identifying documents, and the apartment had come along with it.

It would be a lie to say that Natsuki felt nothing when she looked at that bare room. She felt lonely.

Natsuki walked out of the room.

Before leaving the apartment, she cast a glance into the next room. This was Sakiyama's room.

Sakiyama was a strange man who had been hanging around Natsuki ever since she'd first come to this town. He hadn't stopped following her even after learning that Natsuki was a serial killer, and intrigued by his stoicism, she had taken him in.

The walls of his room were covered in photographs of Natsuki.

He wasn't exactly subtle about his interests, but Natsuki didn't care. They were only photos; he could do what he liked with them.

Still, she was a bit galled at seeing a few pictures of Mutsuko Sakaki and Aiko Noro mixed in with the photos of her. A stalker was supposed to fixate upon one girl and follow her around forever.

What kind of a stalker branched out?

Natsuki wasn't telling Sakiyama that she was leaving. She felt no responsibility to do so. If he wanted to follow her, he could. Whatever he was off doing at the moment, when he returned, he would surely realize immediately that Natsuki wasn't coming back.

Natsuki had been aware, for some time now, that *it* was in this town.

She had been afraid, at first, that it had come here after her, but she could detect no particular motive behind its actions — which suggested, at the least, that it wasn't after Natsuki.

At the same time, she could not afford to let it find her.

Ever since she had sensed its presence, she had done her best to stay under the radar. She had commuted to school during rush hours only, and when class was over, she had blended into the crowd on the way home.

But as long as she remained in high school, she knew that she could be tracked with one glance. The Seishin High School uniform was unique. Once it knew she was attending that school, she would find it difficult to escape.

As long as *it* was moving around the city without any particular objective, there was always a chance it might happen upon her.

There was also a chance that it might leave town, but she couldn't count on that. If she was going to get away, she had to do it now, before she was discovered.

Natsuki checked the clock in the apartment.

It was Friday at 2:00 PM in early December. Even if she went to school now, she wouldn't make it in time for classes.

Of course, Natsuki had no intention of going to school. She was going to run away.

She had considered sending in her notice, but it would take time for it to be accepted. Besides, as long as she abandoned the Natsuki Takeuchi identity, it would probably work itself out.

Of course, in that case, there was no reason for her to have put on her uniform. The fact that she had put it on without thinking indicated some degree of lingering attachment.

She was just making plans about where to go after she left the city when suddenly the intercom buzzed.

She hadn't had any plans to mail her things out, so perhaps it was someone selling something. She could have just ignored whoever-it-was, but she decided that the most efficient method

would be to drive the person away quickly and then leave.

Natsuki opened the front door.

"Heya, Natsuki! Let's walk to school!" a girl in a Seishin High uniform called out in a carefree voice.

It was Yurika Maruyama, who lived in the apartment next door.

Normally, Natsuki would run into her at the front door and they'd walk to school together; Natsuki would never have expected her to come to visit her, especially at this time of day. She assumed she'd gone to school a long time ago.

Yurika was Natsuki's friend... or at least, that was what Yurika seemed to think, and Natsuki did have to admit she was probably closer to her than anyone else she knew at school.

"Why are you waiting until now to go?" Natsuki asked.

"I slept in," Yurika admitted.

"Why don't you just take the rest of the day off?"

Natsuki saw little point in going to school for its own sake. They probably wouldn't even make it in time for last period if they left now.

"That would be unthinkable for a righteous hero like me," the girl declared. "I might not be able to resist the call to oversleep, but that's different from choosing to stay home, right?"

Natsuki was surprised. She had always read Yurika as a rather slovenly type, but it seemed she was actually quite earnest.

Natsuki thought for a moment, then picked up her bag.

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They left the station and headed for the school.

Natsuki had initially intended to find a place to ditch Yurika, yet she had remained with her instead, coming along this far. She could have also just begged off at the time, but she'd found a strange hesitation to do that.

Where they were right now, it would only be a five minute walk to school. Yurika walked with the leisurely pace of one who knew that hurrying wouldn't do any good, and Natsuki matched that pace.

"By the way, how did you know I was at home?" Natsuki asked.

"Hmm, I sort of sensed someone was there."

Yurika had always been a person without shame, always seeming to ignore Natsuki's continued rejections of her attempts at

clinginess.

Once before, Natsuki had asked her why she was so persistent.

"Neighbors should be friends, shouldn't they?" Yurika had answered.

Even if Natsuki ignored her completely, Yurika would walk next to her anyway, resulting in them always arriving at school together. At first, Natsuki had thought about killing her, but she viewed killing people close to her as a last resort. The walk together had happened again and again until she'd eventually stopped minding, and by now, she almost sort of liked it.

Natsuki thought, and said, after a pause, "Did you say 'hero'?"

"Took you a while, huh?" Yurika asked. "Yeah, I've become a hero. I'm gonna beat up all the bad guys. Heroes are pretty rare, though, huh? I keep wondering if some monsters or a demon lord might show up soon."

Natsuki wasn't sure if she was serious or joking, but she decided to play along. "I see. I do know about heroes, though."

"Huh? Really? You're not just saying that?" Yurika asked.

"The enemies they defeat come back wanting to be their allies."

"Isn't that a monster tamer?" Yurika asked.

Natsuki felt a bit better seeing someone recognize her reference. To have silly little conversations, to laugh at trivial things... perhaps that was what Natsuki had been wanting all this time.

But as of today, that was over, too.

She couldn't stay in this city any longer. Every second she delayed increased the chance that she would be found. She had to get away as soon as possible.

Her decision, however, came too late. As she struggled with her own reluctance, destiny caught up with Natsuki.

A man was standing there, only a few meters ahead.

Natsuki hadn't noticed it until it was this close. She hadn't even considered that it might be suppressing its aura. It had never occurred to her that a being of such overwhelming power might resort to something so sneaky.

Her body locked up, her vision narrowed from fear... and then, she noticed something strange. The man was looking at her in surprise.

Perhaps Natsuki had been right that *it* wasn't looking for her. That was why it was surprised.

As it took in the sight of Natsuki standing there, it paused. That

was the one silver lining in this terrible situation.

Natsuki was hesitant to leave Yurika all alone, but she judged that it would be more dangerous to stay with her.

So Natsuki began running with all of her might.

Chapter 1: The Abrupt Final Boss Battle

“A love interest who can’t fight becomes invisible! That’s the law!” Mutsuko declared.

Yuichi Sakaki stared listlessly at his older sister, who was as high-strung as always.

As usual, their topic for the day had nothing to do with survival.

It was after school on a Friday. The members of the survival club, along with their advisor, had gathered in their club meeting room in the old school building. Yuichi was sitting at the long table, chin in his hands, making it clear that he wished he were somewhere else.

The phrase “The Future of Love Interests!” was written on the whiteboard. The hyperactive girl standing in front of it was Mutsuko Sakaki, the president of the survival club and Yuichi’s older sister.

She was a slender girl with long black hair that was decorated with accessories that looked like knives. She was considered one of the most beautiful girls in the school, but her eccentric personality tended to keep the boys away.

The label “Big Sister” hung over her head, visible to Yuichi’s eyes alone. This was thanks to an ability known as “Soul Reader,” which displayed a person’s role in the world.

“Mutsuko... that one really hurt!”

The one who spoke was a petite girl sitting next to Yuichi: Aiko Noro, whose label was “Love Interest.”

She had originally been “Vampire” and had briefly become “Vampire Princess,” but “Love Interest” appeared to be her current default setting.

“After that comment about having a love interest power level of five, too...” Aiko murmured a moment later.

Yuichi overheard her; it seemed she had taken the comment

spoken by Chiharu Dannoura during the spirits incident personally.

"Sakaki! Why can't I escape the feeling that you're talking about me, too?" Kanako demanded.

Kanako Orihara was the club's vice president, and she was sitting across from Yuichi. She had a gentle air about her. Her own label had previously been "Isekai Fanatic," then "Isekai Writer," but it was currently "Love Interest III." She was a published light novel author, and was currently rather well known around the school as a result.

The last member of the club should have been "Love Interest II," Natsuki Takeuchi, but she seemed to be absent today.

Of course, even if she had shown up for class, she probably wouldn't have come to club afterwards. For some reason, recently, Natsuki seemed to be going home the moment class ended.

Natsuki's label had originally been "Serial Killer," so the thought occurred to him that she might be leaving to get up to no good, but there was no way he could ask her about it, so he wasn't sure.

"I don't have abilities, but I can certainly fight." The woman who spoke up from some ways away was a bespectacled teacher: their club advisor, Makina Shikitani.

She had previously been their enemy, but for some reason, she had locked off her own abilities and was now taking part in their club. She was a being known as an Outer, a creature that existed outside of destiny — although Yuichi still didn't know the full scope of the implications of that.

"You think you're a love interest?" Yuichi asked in disgust.

"Hmm? Of course I do. If I could have a label above my head, it would surely read 'Love Interest,'" she said.

She didn't have a label because she was an Outer; labels revealed a person's role in the world, and Outers had no role.

Well, at least it makes it easy to identify who my enemies are... Yuichi had decided that he had no qualms writing off any Outer he met as an enemy.

"So when you say they become invisible, you mean they're not popular?" Yuichi asked.

Mutsuko often spoke as if everyone knew what all her slang and abbreviations meant, so Yuichi had gotten into the habit of immediately confirming any time he had the slightest doubt.

"It's not about popularity!" Mutsuko declared. "It's more that

you don't even realize they exist!"

"But what does that have to do with their inability to fight?" Aiko asked. "I think love interests usually don't fight, do they?"

"Oh, I forgot to mention! I'm only talking about battle stories," said Mutsuko. "Of course you don't need to fight in love comedies and stuff! You can assert yourself well enough just by flirting! But in a battle story, it's easy to turn invisible if you don't have any combat abilities. If you're in a battle manga and you can't fight, you never get any screentime! If you can't be a love interest who supports the protagonist in battle, you'll get forgotten, little by little!"

"Screentime, huh?" Aiko murmured.

"Screentime..." Kanako whispered to herself thoughtfully.

"Like the team assistant in a sports manga, you know?" Mutsuko asked. "Sports manga is usually about the friendship between the men, so the love interest ends up feeling superfluous!"

Now that she mentioned it, that reminded Yuichi of an extremely popular sports manga. There had been a female assistant at the start, but at some point people had stopped caring about her, and she had more or less vanished as a result.

"Does that mean... I should learn how to fight?" Aiko asked, as if making up her mind about something.

"Hey, hey. What are you planning to fight, and how?" Yuichi asked.

"Well... um, you know, like how my brother did," Aiko said. She was trying to keep it vague in front of Kanako, but she was referring to her vampiric powers, which could indeed make her quite a powerful fighter.

"I... I think I can use magic!" Kanako insisted, adding to the bizarre things being said.

Kanako had actually used magic in the past, but her memories of that incident seemed to have grown hazy since then. She had always been the type of girl to run from any sort of unrealistic phenomena she encountered, so when something happened that she didn't understand, she probably rewrote the events in her mind after the fact.

"Well, setting aside the screentime stuff, feelings of intimacy between a man and a woman can really be affected by time spent together!" Mutsuko declared. "The closer you are and the more time you spend together, the more intimate you become! This is called

the mere-exposure effect, also known as Zajonc's Law, since it was first proposed in an essay by American psychologist, Robert Zajonc! It states that the human brain develops a fondness for the familiar!"

"Doesn't that go without saying?" Yuichi asked.

"Yes, it does go without saying," his big sister said. "But most people don't actively think about it, do they? Whether or not you're conscious of something makes a huge difference! So if you want a member of the opposite sex to like you, it's important to keep close to them for as long as you possibly can! You also need direct contact!"

"Not sure how much I trust what you have to say about romance, Sis..." he muttered. She hadn't been in any relationships as far as he knew, and she didn't have any prospects in that regard, either.

"Um, but... if they don't like you from the start, won't it have the opposite effect?" Aiko asked, raising her hand.

"Well, they get used to you," said Mutsuko. "Even if they're thinking, 'I can't stand that jerk!' If you spend enough time together, you might eventually develop an attachment!"

"Does it really work like that?" Yuichi asked suspiciously.

"The human mind is really simple," Mutsuko said confidently. "It thinks, 'I'm with them all the time. If I didn't like them, I wouldn't let them get so close.' So it fools itself into thinking that it must like them. It's similar to the suspension bridge effect: that it's easy to get someone to accept a proposal if you make it while standing on a suspension bridge. It's because the mind mistakes the excitement of being in a high place for the excitement of love."

"Um, does that mean your feelings for someone could just be a misunderstanding?" Yuichi asked.

"In an extreme sense, yes. It's all an illusion, a figment. Romantic feelings are just the necessary side effect of humans acquiring higher brain functions. As animals, humans could really pick anyone to pair off with in order to procreate, although genetic diversity is best. But humans have become intelligent, so we can't bring ourselves to accept just anyone. We had to start developing reasons to accept them, so we came up with love... at least, that's my thought on it, but I acknowledge there are counterarguments against that."

Aiko seemed skeptical, but Mutsuko's explanation didn't seem to be over yet.

“There are actually romantic techniques based off of this human tendency,” Mutsuko said. “Want to hear them?”

“I don’t buy into your theory, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious,” Aiko said intensely.

Kanako also feigned a lack of curiosity while leaning forward a little bit.

“Well, one is getting them to give you presents and help you out.”

“The present strategy?” Aiko tilted her head in confusion at the mention of this strategy, which didn’t sound novel at all.

“No, no!” Mutsuko declared. “You don’t *give* presents; you *get* them. You don’t help *them*, you get them to help *you*. That’s how it works. Their mind will start to think, ‘Why am I helping them? I wouldn’t help them if I hated them, so I must like them.’ Unconsciously, of course.”

“Of course, I bet it wouldn’t work if they really, really hate you,” Yuichi said. This surely only referred to someone who at least basically liked you.

Aiko seemed to accept the argument now, acting as if the scales had fallen from her eyes.

The three girls then blossomed in to love talk, asking Mutsuko what other techniques there were. Yuichi, feeling like he was being left behind, casually turned back to look out the window.

He heard a faint sound.

It was the kind of sound that you wouldn’t normally notice, and that you might ignore even if you did. But Yuichi sensed that something felt strange. Instinct told him that he couldn’t just brush this off.

“Noro!” How many times had this happened by now? Yuichi grabbed Aiko, who was sitting beside him, and picked her up in his arms.

A second later, the window broke.

Amidst the scattering shards of glass, Yuichi caught sight of the bottom of a shoe. Someone was flying in through the window.

Upon determining the glass shards wouldn’t hit anyone else in the club, Yuichi jumped back.

Glass rained down onto the desk as a person also landed on top of it.

Yuichi looked up at this person, still holding Aiko in his arms. It was a girl who had the label “Heir” above her head.

Yuichi couldn't identify the person right away. He knew a couple of people with the "Heir" label, but this girl wasn't either of them.

His classmate Kogan Yanagisawa was a man, so that didn't match up. Neither did Chiharu Dannoura of the music curriculum, who was a woman, but one of substantial girth. That didn't match the slender girl standing on the desk before him.

"My, my. Seen a ghost, have you, Yuichi Sakaki?!" the girl declared.

"Who are you?!" Yuichi shouted back. He had recognized the voice immediately, yet he couldn't help but ask.

The voice was that of Chiharu Dannoura.

"Huh? Dannoura? Huh?" Aiko asked in shock as she climbed down out of Yuichi's arms.

The girl laughed haughtily. "Indeed, 'tis I!"

"Yeah, we got that. Why did you break the window to come in?" Yuichi demanded.

"Sage Mutsuko told me that in romance, impact is of utmost import," Chiharu announced. "I wished to test this theory. Create a powerful impact so that they never forget you, have them thinking about you 24 hours a day. And if you are always thinking about someone, the mind says, perhaps you are in love with them? Such is the tactic I seek to employ!"

"Sis! Stop spreading these annoying ideas about romance!" Yuichi shouted.

She was surely referring to the same romantic philosophies that Mutsuko had just been talking about, and Yuichi couldn't imagine anything more obnoxious than ideas like that catching on.

"I'm not spreading anything! I'm just giving girlish advice!" Mutsuko objected, sounding hurt.

Yuichi looked at Kanako. She was muttering to herself as she wrote in a notebook. She seemed to have retreated from reality... which meant he could probably proceed as if she weren't there.

"Um, I have a lot of questions to ask. But first, what do you want?" Yuichi asked Chiharu. If she had really only shown up to "make an impact," he was going to want to knock her over.

"Ah, yes," Chiharu said haughtily. "That resonance you mentioned has begun. I wished to communicate this to you as soon as possible, thus, I elected to come here myself!"

"Who would come besides you? And you could have just called!" he snapped.

"I deemed it important enough to climb down from the roof with a rope!"

"What does that have to do with its importance?!" Yuichi looked towards the window and saw a rope dangling outside of it. She must have rappelled down and broken through the glass. He had to admit, he was impressed by her physical prowess.

"Um, how did you lose so much weight?" Aiko asked.

"*That's* your question, Noro?! Though I can't deny I'm curious!" Yuichi added.

"Heh heh! I ascertained that Yuichi Sakaki did not like my previous appearance. I slimmed down via Dannoura-style dieting!" Chiharu, who was now so slim she looked like a completely different person, stuck out her chest proudly. Her chest hadn't lost much mass despite her overall slimming down, but otherwise, she seemed to weigh about a third of what she previously had.

"We last met in mid-November, didn't we?" Yuichi asked. It was a little hard to believe she could slim down so much in a few weeks.

"Please explain it to us in more detail!" Aiko burst out.

"Why are you so fixated on that?!" Yuichi couldn't imagine why Aiko wanted to lose weight, but maybe that was important to girls.

"Hah! It's simple. Decrease input, increase output! That is all!"

“If it were that simple, the world wouldn’t be full of dieting techniques!” Aiko said in a rare flash of anger. Chiharu’s casual way of putting it seemed to have gotten under her skin.

“Then let us say I supplemented with a Dannoura secret family medicine!”

“And what medicine is—”

“Enough, Noro,” Yuichi interrupted the rapacious Aiko.

Martial arts and medicine were closely related; there were branches that handed down secret recipes that modern science still couldn’t fully analyze. Any medicine that could be this effective must be extremely powerful, and probably wasn’t something an amateur should be meddling with.

“Dieting aside... you said the resonance has started? Do you know where the enemy is?” he asked.

“I do not!” Chiharu proclaimed proudly.

“Then what did you come here for?!”

“Try changing the way you’re facing,” Makina offered with a wry smile. “The strength and interval of the resonance should change. The degree of the change should give you an idea of what direction of the Divine Vessel lies in. Once you get used to it, you’ll be able to ascertain their positions more concretely.”

“Ah... hmm! Indeed... I feel several... the closest one is this way, I believe?” Chiharu tilted her head and pointed out the broken window.

The others looked in that direction, but of course, there was nobody there... which meant that the Divine Vessel host was, at least, not within their line of sight.

“That’ll make it hard for us to go after them... ah, wait! Monika’s in trouble!” Yuichi exclaimed.

Monika had some of the Divine Vessels, but she couldn’t be host to them, which meant she wouldn’t know about the resonance. Yuichi quickly put a call in to her.

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Off in the direction where Chiharu was pointing, there stood a group of three people.

This was right after Natsuki Takeuchi had run off.

“Hm? Huh? Natsuki?” Yurika Maruyama looked around herself, confused.

She was standing on the pedestrian footpath that ran along the highway, five minutes from school. Natsuki, who had been there a minute ago, had disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Before her stood just a preppy looking young man and a boy with a gloomy air about him, with long bangs that obscured his eyes. As if to add even more chaos to the situation, the resonance began in that instant, as well.

She had felt this once before — a dull sound in her mind, like the flapping of insect wings. This time, the sheer volume of it suggested that her enemy was right in front of her.

"Wow... I came to see the right arm. I never thought I'd find her on the way. I did suppress my presence to come after you... maybe that's why I succeeded?"

The young man's words snapped Yurika back to her senses. "Her" likely referred to Natsuki, so maybe they knew each other. But if Natsuki had run away the moment she saw him, their relationship was probably complicated.

"Hey! What do you want with Natsuki?" Yurika demanded.

"She's calling herself Natsuki here, is she?" the young man asked. "Goodness, what a fix. You're the one I came here to see, but I have business with Natsuki, too... well, since you're the one here right now, I suppose I'll deal with you first. It's rude to think of another woman when in a lady's presence, after all."

"What?! Did you come here after my Divine Vessel?" It was sounding like it, yet something still nagged at Yurika. They should have had to wait for the resonance to find out who to fight, yet he had come here to find Yurika before the resonance even began.

"I'm the game's organizer, actually," he said. "I have a lot of preparations to see to now that we're ready to get started, and that's what I've come here for."

Yurika hadn't even known the game had an organizer, but now that he mentioned it, it wasn't that surprising. The Divine Vessel War seemed like the kind of thing someone would arrange for a reason.

"Are you the one who started this resonance?" she asked.

"Hmm? Oh, the fact that the resonance started now was coincidence. The Divine Vessels make that happen of their own will."

"Okay. So, what did you want, then?"

"I want to test you to see if you're worthy to participate," he

said. “Fight this boy, would you?”

“Here?” Feeling a bit dazed, Yurika put her right hand into her bag, wrapping her fingers around a spring-loaded gun she had brought with her in secret. It was a toy she’d bought at a cheap candy store that couldn’t even pierce through a sheet of newsprint.

“I’ve put up a spell to keep people away,” he said. “You should be fine for a little while. Of course, if I’d known this would happen, I would have put up a barrier... then she couldn’t have gotten away, either.” The man looked a bit chagrined.

The boy at his side spoke up. “H-Hey! I’m really supposed to do this? Are you sure?”

“Given your ability, you should be fine,” the man said. “Of course, remember that it’s just a test. You can wreak as much havoc as you like, but I’m stopping things the minute I get my result.”

Had he not used his ability before, or did he just have no confidence? One way or another, the boy seemed timid as he stepped forward.

The closer the boy came, the more clear it became: he was host to a Divine Vessel.

Defeating the hosts of Divine Vessels was Yurika’s job as a righteous hero.

Becoming a Divine Vessel host could be something that fell into your lap. But those who participated in the battle to get wishes couldn’t be anyone decent.

They were evil — and if they were evil, it was okay to kill them. Yurika pulled out the peashooter and fired.

Both the peashooter and her right arm were enveloped in a black flame that gave the toy every bit the power of a real gun.

Yurika didn’t even move very quickly, yet the boy still couldn’t dodge it in time. The bullet hit him straight between the eyes...

...But that was all.

It was just a silver-painted toy ball with no real power behind it. It bounced off his forehead and rolled onto the ground in exactly the manner that one would expect.

Silence fell. Both Yurika and the boy froze up in surprise.

For Yurika, it was over the fact that her ability hadn’t worked.

For the boy, it was over the fact that she had fired a toy gun at him in this situation.

“Ah, shall I explain? Neither of you seems to understand what just happened,” the young man said breezily as he watched things

play out. “Your ability enhances weapons such that even a toy gun can be lethal. I wonder what you named the ability...” He didn’t seem to mind interrupting them despite the fact that they were in the middle of a fight.

Yurika ignored him; she didn’t care about ability names.

“Oh, but naming these things makes them so much more exciting,” the man said. “Let me see... let’s call it ARMS. It’s a rather basic pun — arm, arms — but at least it’s transparent. This boy’s ability is Skill Eater. Put simply, it’s an ability that devours other abilities — negates them, in other words.”

“ARMS?! Hey! If you know this stuff, then tell me! What would’ve happened if I hadn’t been able to negate it?” the boy yelled at the man.

Yurika began to back away. There was nothing she could do. She had other toy weapons in her arsenal, but they meant nothing if he could negate her ability.

“Not even I can say what an ability will be before it activates,” the man said. “And I’m sure you can handle a death or two. You must have some insurance.”

“Well, whatever,” the boy said. “So I can negate the abilities of Divine Vessels, right? Isn’t that kinda cheating in a supernatural battle like this?”

Yurika began to think. It was true that negating abilities was a threat, but surely there must be some condition attached to it.

As the boy had said, the Divine Vessel War was a battle of superpowers, and the Evil God had arranged it for some sort of purpose. He’d handed out the vessels and arranged the resonance to cause battles to happen, which meant that he wanted to see them fight.

While things might never be perfectly fair, he couldn’t want to see completely one-sided developments, either. Which meant the boy must have some weakness, or some limit to what he could do.

While she was thinking, the boy came even closer.

He was walking more confidently now; perhaps negating her ability had encouraged him.

Yurika examined the boy.

His uniform was that of Seishin High, just like Yurika’s. He wasn’t carrying a weapon, and the fact that he was walking towards her suggested that he had no long-range attack capabilities.

His frame was lanky, indicating a lack of physical strength,

while Yurika was an athletic girl. She thought maybe she could take him in grappling.

As he approached, the boy raised his arm.

His hand was open, suggesting preparation for a slap, but he was too far away for that.

He launched his attack, which was laughably slow and shaky.

Yurika didn't even have to dodge; she just stepped back. The boy's palm passed through the air in front of her. Her body shook from a sudden chill, and she was assailed with a terrible feeling of loss.

She had lost something, but she didn't know what.

"What... was that?!" In her confusion, Yurika ended up asking her enemy about it.

"This is the true power of Skill Eater: the power to steal the abilities of another," said the man.

The man had had no reason to reveal the true nature of the boy's ability, and plenty of reasons not to, yet he'd answered her question without concern.

"Earlier you said that it negated abilities..."

"Skill Eater does both," said the man. "It can negate abilities directed at him, and if he gets close, he can devour an ability and take it for his own."

"Hey, what is this? Avoiding surprise attacks? It's a dud..." the boy spat as he scooted away from her again.

"That will happen sometimes," the man said. "You won't know what abilities you can steal until you try. Incidentally, avoiding surprise attacks means that even if someone attacks you out of the blue, the attack won't hit—"

The young man began explaining more to the boy. Yurika began to think about running. She couldn't think of a way to fight back at the moment, so her best option seemed to be running away to buy time.

"—Oh, and I don't recommend running away," the man said, as if he'd read her mind. "This is a test. Why don't you show me how you'd handle this situation?"

If it was a test, what would happen if she failed? It seemed too much to hope for that he'd just let her go home.

He called me a hero, but I can't do anything...

Even if Yurika was a hero, her only power was to be revived in a church if she died. That could be her key out of here, but Yurika

didn't have the courage to commit suicide. She remained stock still as the boy approached.

Without the ability to use her right arm, Yurika was just an ordinary high school girl. She didn't have any way of fighting someone with supernatural abilities.

"Yeah! Don't run away! Give me a decent ability already!" the boy shouted.

Yurika let out a gasp at the boy's words. He was assuming Yurika had multiple skills, which meant there might be more in her hero's arsenal. The moment she realized that, a strange sight appeared before her.

→Item
Strength
Skill
Ally
Other

It was a list of words in a white frame.

Yurika realized these must be her hero skills.

It wasn't quite what she'd been expecting, but perhaps it was modeled after a video game. There was a cursor on the list which she could move with her own will.

But what should I do?! She didn't know which one to choose, but she also didn't have time to think about it.

Yurika chose her command via instinct.

"Urgh!" The next instant, the boy let out an undignified shout and went flying off to the side.

The one who had done it was a man dressed in black: Soichi Kiryu, the man in the church who had called her a hero.

Kiryu's hips were lowered, his fist thrust straight out to the side. Given what had happened, he must have punched the boy from the side.

The boy was currently lying on the ground, having first crashed through a shop sign and hit a wall.

"Yurimaru. Have you finally realized how to use your powers?" Kiryu asked.

Yurika had chosen the Ally command, meaning the one friend she had waiting in the wings had been added to her "party."

"Damn! That hurt! What the hell? I thought this skill let me

dodge surprise attacks!" the humiliated boy cursed at the man, still lying on the ground.

Yurika was surprised he was still conscious, although his arm and leg were bent at strange angles — broken, or perhaps dislocated.

"Surprise attack dodging avoids only the blow that begins the battle," the man said. "The effect won't activate while battle is in progress."

"You said you'd protect me! Look what she did! Why did you let this happen?"

"Don't worry," the man said. "The ability you stole the other day enhances your endurance. You'll recover soon enough, although you will be immobile for a while. All right, you both pass. I'd be worried about the girl by herself, but if you're with her, I think she'll be fine."

The man was now standing beside the boy. Yurika hadn't even seen him move.

"You think I will allow you to leave?" Kiryu asked, assuming a fighting stance while facing in the man's direction.

He dropped his hips and spread his legs, shifted his weight to his back leg, and turned his palms upwards with both hands thrust forward as if to guard his face.

"Yes, I do. Because you're physically incapable of stopping me."

The man grabbed the boy's collar and jumped. In an instant, they were both on top of the five-story building the boy had slammed into before.

It was true that he probably couldn't follow them like this.

"Goodbye. The real battle will start soon. I hope you're looking forward to it."

With that, both the man and the boy disappeared.

The Divine Vessel resonance had stopped at some point, but it didn't seem to have anything to do with the pair's disappearance.

Yurika had heard that resonance didn't stop until something was settled, which meant that must have occurred somewhere else.

Kiryu released his fighting stance and turned to face Yurika. "This happened because you rely too much on your Divine Vessel."

"What was I supposed to do?" Yurika demanded. "And what have you been off doing, by the way? I haven't heard from you since that first time!"

"I have been preparing the church. Rejoice, for you have

steadily been gaining new disciples."

"Disciples? The heck?" she cried.

"Believers in the power of the hero," he intoned.

It seemed Kiryu was involved in some kind of hero-based religion. From his outfit she had assumed he was a Christian priest, but that appeared to not be true. He seemed to be the founder of his own sect.

"Well, all right," she said. "Whatever the reason, you did save me, so... thanks."

"I merely did what is expected of me," he said. "But I really must have you grow a bit stronger, Yurimaru. To have been nearly beaten by one of his level..."

"Okay, I get it. I need to level up or something, right?"

The command list had disappeared at some point, but she was able to bring it up by focusing on it. She chose "Strength."

Name: Yurimaru
Level: 1
Power: 5
Endurance: 10
Speed: 6
Wisdom: 2
Luck: 20
HP: 15
MP: 6

The string of numbers around her seemed to indicate Yurika's stats.

Yurika felt a sense of danger run through her. The numbers did seem awfully low. She needed to do something about that as soon as possible, but she didn't actually know how to level herself up. This wasn't a video game, so there weren't just monsters wandering around for her to fight.

Well, I guess I just need to beat up something or other...

There were plenty of bad people out there in the world. As a righteous hero, Yurika thought optimistically, that she could just beat them up.

"I'll just level by beating up some worthless punks who don't deserve to live... ah!" Yurika had gotten a little distracted by the strange series of events, but she was suddenly reminded that

Natsuki was missing. “I’m gonna go look for my friend! See you later!”

“Understood,” said the priest. “But might I offer you one word of warning?”

“What is it? I’m kind of in a hurry!” Yurika snapped.

Natsuki had run when she’d seen the young man. In other words, she’d known he was dangerous. It was quite possible that those two would be going after her next, and Yurika was itching to find her first and save her.

“You won’t be able to use that technique again for a while,” said the priest. “A hero can have four allies at maximum, and once you have placed someone in your party, you cannot trade them out until you have more than four.”

“Fine! I see!” She didn’t actually see, but Yurika began running anyway.

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“Now...” After seeing Yurika off, Kiryu resumed course to his original destination.

He had been lucky, perhaps, that he had happened to be so close to Yurika. If he hadn’t been, he wouldn’t have been able to join her party; she couldn’t instantly call a party member who was too far away. Perhaps, though, such luck was one of her natural heroic qualities.

First, we must cut unneeded ties...

With his newfound confidence that Yurika had talent as a hero, Kiryu hardened his resolve.

He arrived in front of a moderately-sized, five-story hospital building. As he entered, he found a gathering of anachronistic-looking delinquents lazing around in high-collared uniforms.

They were lounging on the sofas, surrounded by cigarette butts and empty beer cans. It was unlikely that there were many people eccentric enough to want a check-up at a hospital like this.

“This a surprise,” he said. “I was expecting a medical Outer.”

“What’d you say?!” One of the delinquents rose to his feet, let out a stupid-sounding scream, and grabbed at Kiryu.

But the moment he put his hand on him, Kiryu merely twisted his shoulder, and the delinquent went flying. He had anticipated his opponent’s movements and synchronized with them, using his

opponent's strength against him.

The delinquent lost his balance and stumbled across the room at high speed. As he slammed loudly into the wall, the other delinquents stood up en masse.

One of them threw a punch. Kiryu grabbed the fist with his left hand, stepped in, and hit him with his right elbow. Another came in with a kick.

Kiryu slapped the knee of the kicking leg with his palm, stepped in, and slammed the back of his fist into the goon's face.

The techniques, which weren't terribly impressive in and of themselves, still took out the delinquents one by one. Once he had beaten enough of them, the rest of the goons just stepped back and watched from a distance.

With his obstacles gone, Kiryu now proceeded deeper into the hospital. He found the hospital director's room and entered to find a man in a white lab coat standing there.

He was Kiryu's true objective: the man who had given Yurika the Evil God's right arm.

"How utterly deplorable," Kiryu said. "To allow delinquents to run rampant over a hospital is an insult to the medical profession."

"Fine words from a violent priest," the man said. He must have known that Kiryu was there, yet he remained perfectly at ease.

If this man was what was known as an Outer, then he likely had no fear of being harmed by a mortal. Still, Kiryu had not come here to question him. He had spoken up only out of a sense of playfulness.

Slowly, Kiryu approached the man in the lab coat. Perhaps the man didn't know what he was there to do, because all he did was stand there. He must have been confident that no matter what he did, he could survive it.

Kiryu came within touching distance of the man. He gently took his left arm and pulled the man close, then placed his left palm against his chest. The movement was so gentle that the man apparently felt no malice whatsoever.

Zhen jiao, the stamping foot.

Kiryu stepped so hard he cracked the floor beneath him.

He kicked off the ground, channeling all the power of the recoil into his upper body. None of it was wasted; every bit of it passed through his hand and into the man's chest.

"What..." The white-coated man's eyes opened wide in surprise.

He must have found it unthinkable, that such an attack couldn't possibly hit him, and yet...

"I have fought your kind many times before, and I have come to understand something," said Kiryu. "Fast attacks are ineffective. For some reason, you always dodge them."

Projectile attacks were the best example. No matter how many times you fired at them, the shot never hit.

Kiryu continued, "But you cannot possibly dodge an attack from point blank range."

That did not mean that you could just plant a gun barrel in their chest and fire. If you did, the gun would just jam. Knives would also break, and poison would suffer a chemical reaction and lose its potency.

However, it was harder for the influence of a Worldview Holder to affect the body of another person. A person was like a little world unto themselves. This meant that the most effective method against an Outer was to attack them bare-handed at close range.

"Th-That won't be enough to—" the man objected. He coughed up blood that sprinkled Kiryu's clothes, but Kiryu wasn't fazed.

Another zhen jiao.

There was no sign of damage to the man's chest, yet all the power was focused on a single point: his heart.

"I was told to consider people like you 'exceptionally lucky,'" Kiryu said. "I never expected that a single attack would finish you." Part of an Outer's nature was that if there was even the slightest chance to survive, they always would. Which meant he had to systematically shave away any chance of survival until at last they were dead.

Kiryu continued hitting him with penetrating tou jin strikes. Even after the man stopped moving, Kiryu kept attacking, and only released the man when he was sure that he was dead.

Just to be sure, he produced a knife from his pocket and threw it at him. It didn't miss, but stuck right into the man's stomach — which meant, in Kiryu's judgment, that he was no longer an Outer now, just a mere sack of flesh.

"Now, Yurimaru can focus on her exploits as a hero," Kiryu said with satisfaction.

Chapter 2: It's Been a While, So Let's Try to Get These Stories Straight

It was a Saturday in early December.

For once, Ryoma Takei was enjoying a quiet, peaceful morning.

Normally, someone would come to wake him up, or ask him do something stupid, and he'd end up starting his day in a panicked rush.

Today, though, he woke up after a few rings of the alarm clock, and even after he finally sat up, he was alone in his room.

The thought "Stranger things do happen" was knocking about in his sleep-addled brain when he heard a voice yelling from downstairs. It seemed the panic was happening there instead.

He changed into his school uniform and descended the stairs, where he found four girls in the living room.

"Huh?" Ryoma wasn't sure of how to react to the sight before him, because one of the four was someone he definitely wasn't expecting to see.

His older sister Kotori, his little sister Shiori, and his childhood friend Mio Morikawa were a typical sight, sitting around the breakfast table as usual. But today, they were joined by a girl with red hair.

Ryoma recognized her as Ende, the young girl who had sneaked into his room yesterday and made a contract with him. She was wearing a uniform from Ryoma's high school, and eating breakfast like she belonged there. Kotori was staring at Ende in disbelief, while Shiori and Mio were fixing her with their most deadly glares.

The minute Shiori and Mio noticed Ryoma's arrival, they turned their hostility to him.

"Big Brother! Who is this person?"

"Ryoma! What's going on here?"

Ryoma had no idea what to tell them; Ende hadn't mentioned anything to him yesterday about staying at their house.

"Why would you ask me? How should I know?" he answered.

But despite his confusion, he took a seat down next to Ende.

"Good morning," she said. "I haven't eaten like this for a while, but it's nice to get to enjoy Japanese food."

"Why are you eating breakfast here?" Ryoma asked.

Ende was utterly shameless. She had probably been brushing off Shiori and Mio's questions in exactly this way. "It's not as if I don't have permission. Your big sister kindly made a portion for me."

Ryoma's elder sister Kotori did have a magnanimous personality, but he never would have expected her to cook for a complete stranger.

"What's going on here?" Ryoma fixed his eyes on Ende.

"I'll be living here for a while," she said. "Oh, and I've transferred to your class, too."

"Huh?! Why?!"

"We've signed a contract, which means our fates are intertwined," Ende said as if it were the simplest thing in the world. "I need to keep an eye on how things are proceeding."

"That wasn't what I asked!"

"What do you mean, you're living here?!" Shiori exclaimed.

"This is not okay!" Mio shouted.

"We don't know what might happen next," Ende said calmly, responding only to Ryoma. "I think it's best if I spend as much time with you as possible so that I can deal with situations as they arise."

She really had some nerve.

"Ryoma, eat your breakfast already," Ende continued. "We'll be walking to school together so that I can explain what's going to be expected of you from now on. Oh, and we don't need the childhood friend listening in. You'd better go on ahead." Ende finally looked at Mio.

Mio's face had turned red with fury. She was apparently too angry to speak. She finally sputtered, "Wh-Why do I have to take orders from you? Who even are you? What are you doing in our house?!"

"It's not exactly your house, is it?" Ende asked. "I don't see why I have to answer you."

Ende's response stunned Mio into silence. She was used to coming and going in the Takei household like she belonged there, but perhaps she was aware of this much.

"I'm his little sister, so you *do* have to answer me!" Shiori shouted. "And I will not allow you to live in this house!"

“But as the youngest of the family, I doubt you have the right to argue with the head of the household,” said Ende. “And I do have permission from the head of the household — Takehiko Takei.”

“H-He never mentioned it to me!”

“Me, either...” Ryoma wondered when she could have gotten that permission.

While Ryoma looked at the girl suspiciously, Shiori produced her cell phone and quickly placed the call.

“Hello! Dad? Huh? Oh... but... okay...” Shiori’s initial fire gradually faded, and at last she numbly hung up the phone. “He says the daughter of an overseas partner is going to be studying abroad in Japan and he wants us to look after her for a while...”

Ende nodded briskly. “That should settle it, right? I hope you’ll take good care of me. Now, Ryoma, finish your breakfast.”

“S-Sure...” He still had questions about all this, but he did have to go to school. Ryoma quickly began to shovel down his food.

Once Ryoma finished eating, Ende stood up.

Mio stood up with her. “W-We’re going to the same place, so we should walk together, right?”

“Hmm,” said Ende. “If you can’t be convinced to go on ahead, then we’ll go without you.”

With that, Ende placed a hand on the neck of Ryoma, who had stood up after her. Then, with perfect casualness, she pressed her lips to Ryoma’s. It all happened so suddenly that Ryoma had no chance to protest.

“Hey!” Mio froze up at the sight.

Ryoma’s mind went blank as he felt something bewitchingly warm wriggling around in his mouth.

“The childhood friend has locked up. Now, let’s get going!” Ende directed.

Ryoma could do nothing but let her drag him along.

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Ryoma’s school was a prep school, so they still had classes on Saturday mornings. But since fewer schools did that nowadays, there weren’t many other students out on the road that day.

After finally snapping back to reality, Ryoma laid into Ende. “L-Listen, you! You can’t just spring stuff like that on me!”

“You’ve saved a lot of girls in your time,” Ende said coolly.

“That can’t be the first time you’ve been kissed, can it? I didn’t think it would lock you up, too.”

“No one’s ever Frenched me before!” Just the memory of it caused his face to turn red. He had a little experience, but it had all more or less been accidental. He’d never had someone aggressively seize hold of his lips before.

“Well, now that we can talk, let’s discuss what’s going to happen next.” Despite saying they were going to talk, Ende’s attention seemed focused on a trade paperback she was holding in one hand. She was reading it, skillfully turning the pages with one hand, and showed no signs of stopping.

Reluctantly, then, Ryoma decided to take the lead. “So, what exactly am I supposed to do? You mentioned something about an Evil God, right? But you left before we worked the whole thing out.”

Ende had only appeared yesterday. He had agreed to work with her, and she’d forced something she’d called the eye of the Evil God onto his right eye. The eyeball had disappeared, and apparently satisfied, Ende had left the room.

“Yeah,” said Ende. “I had a whole lot to do, after all. I had to transfer to your school and contact your parents.”

“Speaking of which, how’d you swing that so easily?” he asked.

“There’s not much you can’t do with sufficient money and influence.”

Ryoma still had his doubts about a mysterious girl being able to transfer to his school out of the blue, but Ende made it sound like it was nothing.

“Just what the hell are you?” he demanded.

“Oh, did I not explain that part?”

“No. You were in my room when I got home, and all you said was the stuff about wanting me to participate in the Divine Vessel War thing.”

Thinking back, he had agreed to the contract awfully carelessly. Ryoma was used to getting swept up in strange situations, but this time he wished he’d asked a few more questions first.

“Just think of me as a mysterious figure who manipulates this world from behind the scenes,” Ende said. “Like I said before, I have enough money and authority to do whatever I want, so I’ve got a lot of time on my hands. To alleviate some boredom, I decided to take part in the Divine Vessels War. Well, I think that’s enough

about me, don't you? I could explain a little more if you like, but it's not really relevant to what's going on."

"Why would someone as powerful as you want to live in my house?" he demanded.

"Because early in the story, the protagonist's house is a safe zone."

"Huh?"

"Like I said at breakfast, I also want to watch things unfold up close... but while I'm effectively invincible, getting involved in the Divine Vessels War means that others like me might come after us. I'm not exactly clinging to life this late in the game, but if I'm going out of my way to participate, I want to get as far as I can."

The immortality stuff sounded fishy to Ryoma, but there was nothing in her expression that suggested she was joking. He decided not to think too hard about that part. He didn't understand this girl Ende from the start, so one or two more mysteries didn't change much at all.

"Well, whatever. So what did you want to discuss?"

"First, let me give a brief explanation of the Divine Vessels War," Ende said. "As it sounds like, the participants are trying to steal things called Divine Vessels from each other. You'll be a part of that." She made it sound like there was no turning back at this point.

"Steal things... I bet that's not something we can do peacefully, huh?" he asked.

"Yeah. It means you kill each other. Of course, you can take the vessels without killing, but killing is probably faster and less likely to bite you in the backside later. Since the victory isn't decided until the very last second, showing mercy to the wrong opponent could get you killed down the line."

"Um, so the goal is just to collect all the vessels, then?" Despite what she said, if that was all it took, then killing might not be necessary. He didn't know what he might run into as they went on, but he was hoping to avoid killing as much as possible.

"Yes," she said. "If you collect them all, the Evil God will come back to life and grant your wish."

"Wait a minute. What do you mean, come back to life? Isn't an Evil God a thing you should try to stop from coming back to life?" Ryoma suddenly got a sinking feeling about this. She'd mentioned collecting Divine Vessels, but she hadn't mentioned anything about

this resurrecting an Evil God.

"You might be right," Ende said. "The last time it happened, it started World War II, so if he revives again, it might cause the third go-round, perhaps?"

"Hey!"

"I don't think there's any need to worry, though," she shrugged. "The second one worked itself out, after all. But let's not get bogged down in that detail. We can talk about it later."

It seemed she had no intention of discussing that part anymore, so Ryoma urged her to continue with her explanation.

"The Divine Vessels are parts of the Evil God's body," Ende said. "They're comprised of four eyes, six arms, and one pair of legs that includes left and right. There are also the heart, ribs, wings — those act as a pair, like the legs — head, spine, tentacles, horns, scales, and pit organ, which makes twenty in all. Which means there are twenty participants, too."

"It sounds like a monster!" Ryoma exclaimed. It was hard for him to imagine what that would all add up to be, but it didn't sound like anything he wanted to see.

"Yeah, I've never seen the complete version either, so I'm kinda looking forward to it. There's more to him than just the Divine Vessel parts I named, after all."

"Well, appearance aside... twenty? That's a lot."

She said they'd be stealing the Divine Vessels from each other, and while he might not have to fight them all, it was still sounding like an annoying amount of stuff to track.

"Hey, it won't be that much trouble," she said. "Quite a few have been consolidated by now, and there will probably be even fewer participants eventually. If you really want to conserve energy, you could just challenge the last man standing, but I wouldn't recommend it. All the Divine Vessels come with their own unique abilities, so whoever collects the most will inevitably be more powerful."

"And I've got one of them myself, right? What ability does it give me?"

That part, at least, didn't surprise Ryoma at all. He'd gotten mixed up with people with crazy powers before, and whenever he did, he'd find he'd unlocked powers of his own, which he'd have to use to get out of the trouble.

"The abilities of a Divine Vessel are determined at the time

they're first observed," she said. "Usually that occurs when they're matched with a host, but my kind have a power called Soul Reader. So just looking at them, for us, causes them to be observed. Usually the personality of the host influences the ability, but your Divine Vessel was mostly influenced by me. So, sorry to tell you, but your ability is pretty unimpressive." Ende didn't sound very sorry at all.

"Yeah, nice disclaimer," he said. "Would you just tell me what it is already?"

"You have the Evil God's upper eye, which confers magical sight. That's a power to see something special, or to influence the things you look at. Your magic sight can tell you how many books a person's read."

"What?"

"When you look at someone with your right eye, you'll see a number over their head. That number will tell you how many books that person's read in their life."

Ryoma paused, thinking about it. "What am I supposed to do with that?"

Even after thinking, he couldn't figure out how that could possibly be useful. It was neither poison nor cure. The best he could think of was if he were thrown into a bizarre quiz game and asked to name how many books a person had read... but he doubted that would ever come up.

"Nothing," said Ende. "There's no way it's ever going to be useful, and no dangerous situation in which it could possibly turn things in your favor. So if you're thinking it might just come in handy someday, you should abandon the very idea right now."

"You seem pretty confident about that... so what's the point of me having the eye, then?"

"The ability may not be useful, but the Divine Vessels resonate from time to time," she said. "This allows hosts of Divine Vessels to detect each other's location. I mean, without something like that, the war would never end, right?"

"I think I get the drift. But what, concretely, am I supposed to do? Just find people with Divine Vessels and beat them up?"

"More or less. Wait for the resonance, find a host, and steal their Vessel. Incidentally, you seem like the type who doesn't like to get innocents mixed up in these things, right?"

"Of course." Ryoma furrowed his brow; that seemed to go without saying.

“You won’t allow innocents to be used as pawns or human shields?”

“Of course not! Stop asking already!” he snapped.

“I see. That’ll make things tricky... but maybe also interesting, in a way. Perhaps the protagonist effect will make up for it, too.” Ende looked up from her book, her expression truly troubled in a way he had never seen from her before. But that lasted only for a moment before she smiled again. “There’s an enemy here.”

“What?!” Ryoma looked all around, but saw no sign of an enemy nearby. The people around him all seemed completely ordinary.

“I can’t tell where they’re watching us from, but this book is depicting us from the enemy’s point of view, so it’s obvious we’re being watched.”

“Depicting us? Point of view?” he asked.

“It’s one of my abilities. I can choose one worldview and view it in the form of a book. If it’s about the past, I can even see people’s states of mind with perfect clarity. If it’s happening now, things get a little sketchier. If it’s in the future, I can only read about broad trends. Anyway, if you don’t want innocents to get dragged into this, you’d better turn right here.”

He didn’t understand what she was talking about, but he did as he was told. “What’s going on here? I thought you couldn’t know these things without the resonance stuff. Or is this unrelated to the war?”

“No, it is related... I think the final boss is about to appear.”

“Final boss?” he asked. Ende’s statements were always so clipped; they rarely made any sense to him.

“Try to read between the lines. The final boss of the Divine Vessel War would have to be the Evil God, right?”

“Huh?” he said. “I thought you said he couldn’t resurrect without all his body parts.” She had just been talking about how the Divine Vessels were parts of the Evil God’s body, and bringing them together would bring him back to life. That meant he shouldn’t be alive right now... so how could he possibly be here?

“Well, you can ask him that yourself,” she said.

At some point, the people around them had vanished. Ryoma kept following Ende’s directions until they arrived at a run-down old park. The confident way she directed him suggested that Ende knew the local geography well.

The park was in the middle of a residential zone and roughly twenty meters square. It seemed rather neglected, with rusty equipment and a sandbox littered with trash.

There were two people standing in the park. One was an older boy wearing a blazer. His hair was long, with bangs that concealed most of his face, and he was about as tall as Ryoma.

Ryoma identified his blazer as the school uniform of Seishin High School. Seishin High was in the same city, and he saw students wearing that uniform on the train to school every day.

The other person was a man, both taller and older than the boy. He was smiling gently, and had an affable air about him that got on Ryoma's nerves.

"Hey," the man said, addressing Ryoma and Ende. He seemed perfectly at ease with no malice about him, yet it felt unsettling to have a complete stranger call out to him in the park.

"'Evil God' and 'Host,'" said Ende. "They're our enemies. 'Host' is pretty vague, though... It may mean he has a Divine Vessel inside him, but it also suggests there's nothing else noteworthy about him. Why would someone like that have a Divine Vessel?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, but... didn't we come here to get away?" Ryoma asked. "Why did we run into our enemies anyway?"

"Oh, they were clearly waiting for us here."

"You mean we walked right toward them?!" Ryoma yelled at Ende, who didn't sound at all guilty about it.

"You didn't want to get innocents involved, right?" she said. "If we'd kept walking towards school, they might have ambushed us somewhere along the way."

"Fine," Ryoma snapped. "But look, that guy seems pretty human to me. You made it sound like he was some kind of monster. Is he even really our enemy? He doesn't even look like he's gonna attack."

"It's true that the Evil God is not necessarily our enemy. But I wonder..." Ende turned towards the man. "Are you our enemy or not?"

"That's a good question," said the man. "This boy is a carrier of a Divine Vessel, which means *he* is your enemy. Whether or not I am is a bit more up in the air... Right now, I'm on his side, but that might not always be the case in the future." The man pointed at the boy beside him. There was no sign of tension about him at all — no

sense at all that he was their enemy, nor that he was involved in the war.

"There wasn't even any of that resonance stuff," Ryoma mentioned to no one in particular. He had been told that vessel holders were supposed to fight after being drawn together by resonance, so why were they running into each other now?

"I'm sorry if I've disappointed you. This is a bit of an extracurricular activity... the war isn't meant to be so rigorously scheduled," the young man said apologetically. There was something oddly timid about him.

"So, what do we do? Fight?" Ryoma asked. "You seemed to have your hopes up, but right now it's not humility to say I'm just an ordinary high schooler."

In certain circumstances, Ryoma had found himself able to use special powers or weapons, but at the moment he effectively couldn't do anything. For instance, if he'd been summoned to a fantasy world where magic was commonplace, he'd be able to use it, but the minute he came back to his own world, he'd lose that ability.

"There are things we can do, so don't worry about that," said Ende. "The question is whether or not you want to fight him. I think he just wants to size you up, and I'd rather avoid a fight right now if we can."

Ryoma looked at the man again. There was nothing bloodthirsty in his manner, and he showed no signs of wanting to attack them right away.

The boy spoke for the first time. "You want me to take these guys on?" The words bespoke a great confidence on his part.

"No, I'll fight this time," the young man said. "I don't think you're quite ready to handle an Outer." He stepped forward and left the boy behind. "Shall we, then? I just want to see what you can do, but it could still turn out fatal if you're not careful." As the man spoke, the sky above them suddenly turned black. "I overheard you saying you didn't want to harm innocents, so I'm putting up a precaution. No matter what happens in this park, it shouldn't harm outsiders. Also, you're only supposed to fight me. This boy isn't ready yet."

"What the heck?" Ryoma asked, dumbfounded. He was no stranger to odd phenomena, but seeing the sky turn black like this was still surprising.

“It’s a barrier,” explained Ende. “If it’s true that nothing we do in here will affect the outside world, then we probably can’t get out, either.”

“That’s right,” the man said. You can’t escape until I release it, or you defeat me.”

While Ryoma was still fishing around for how to respond, the man approached him.

“Well, this isn’t any good... I can’t exactly get your measure if you won’t fight me...” The man rubbed his head with his right hand, looking troubled. Perhaps he could tell that Ryoma was in no mood to fight. “You leave me no choice. I’ll provide a light show of my power, and you can decide what to do from there on.” With those words, the man disappeared.

“Where’d he go?!” Ryoma shouted.

“I’m right here.” The voice came from behind him.

Ryoma turned around to see the man standing about five meters behind them, his hand on the support pole for the slide. There was clear disappointment in his eyes.

“If you can’t see me when I’m going this slow, you might want to quit right now.” As he spoke, the man uprooted the slide from the ground. It wasn’t that big, but it still should have been too big for a human to lift at all, let alone with one hand.

Then the man threw the slide at him.

Of course, Ryoma couldn’t perceive that movement, either. He could just assume what had happened from the fact that the next thing he knew, the man was in a throwing position, the slide had disappeared, and there was an enormous crash behind him.

He turned around to see the slide in pieces at the entrance to the park.

It must have hit the barrier — that’s what he’d meant when he said what they did here wouldn’t affect the outside world. It was as if there was a thick wall around them.

“You said there were things we could do, didn’t you?!” Ryoma grabbed Ende’s shoulders and shook her. He had no idea of how to deal with this. Pathetic though it may be, all he had to rely on now were Ende’s words.

“Let’s see... The boy looks weaker, so why don’t we go after him?” Ende pointed to the boy, who hadn’t budged from his original position.

“I wouldn’t recommend that,” the man said breezily. “If you do

that, I'll get serious. I just want to see what you can do. If you can prove that you're worthy to participate, I'll withdraw."

"That's probably true," Ende said.

"Don't give me this 'probably' stuff! What are we supposed to do, then?" Ryoma shouted.

"Don't worry," Ende said. "I'd expected we'd have to fight on about this level. That's why I chose you."

Something hit the ground beside Ryoma, as if cued by her words.

"Huh?!" He looked beside him to see if the man had thrown something again, but all he saw was a giant box looming over him. It was squat and wide, but still taller than Ryoma.

"Huh?!"

The box also had legs. Its knees were bent as if to absorb a shock, suggesting it must have jumped here from somewhere.

As he watched, dumbstruck, the legs withdrew into the box, and then it opened from the center as if spreading its wings. It took Ryoma a few seconds to realize that this thing, stuffed with books, must be a bookshelf.

"What is this?" he demanded.

"My bookshelf."

"I know it's a bookshelf! Why did it jump here, what does it want, how'd it get around the barrier, and all kinds of other questions! Well? Is it gonna fight for us or something?"

"What are you talking about?" Ende said. "A bookshelf can't do anything but hold books."

"It just jumped here, didn't it? It has legs!" As Ryoma continued to lay into Ende, he could hear the young man laughing.

Ryoma realized it wasn't time to be squabbling with her — their enemy could attack at any moment.

"Oh, don't mind me," the man said. "You have some sort of plan, right? Then I'll wait as long as you want."

Ryoma looked over and saw the young man smiling. Maybe it was true that he was going to wait. He must have really thought they were no threat at all; the man was brimming with confidence.

"He said he'll wait," Ryoma said. "So the big bookshelf jumped over to us. What now?"

Ende didn't answer him, but just started browsing through the books on the shelf. "Hmm... ah, there it is." Ende pulled out a book and opened it up.

“Are you seriously going to start reading that?” he demanded.

“No, I just need it open. Now you can fight.”

Ryoma heard something else hit the ground.

“At your command, I have come,” a voice intoned.

Ryoma turned at the familiar, clear sound of the voice. A girl was kneeling there, clad in silver armor.

“Huh? Uh? I didn’t call you here...” Ryoma said immediately. He’d never even thought of calling for reinforcements.

“Hmph!” The girl pouted in response.

“Um... Regin, was it?” Ryoma asked. “What are you doing here?”

She was a Valkyrie, a girl Ryoma had met once in another world.

“Incidentally, I guess there’s no limit on things entering the barrier from outside, huh?” Ende commented.

“Is that really important right now?” Ryoma demanded.

“This is one of my abilities. By opening a book about a given story, I can change the worldview we inhabit. That means that right now, you have all of your abilities from a previous adventure.”

As usual, he felt like Ende wasn’t actually responding to anything he said. But he decided to set that aside for now. The power of a Valkyrie should be enough to deal with the Evil God.

“I don’t get this at all, but you’re saying Regin here is the real thing? Then that’s enough for me! Reginleiv! Beat that guy!” Ryoma pointed to the young man.

“As you command.”

The girl — Reginleiv — stood, drew her sword, and rushed at the young man.

* * * * *

Natsuki was resting in the waiting room of an abandoned hospital.

She’d begun her flight on Friday afternoon, had spent all night running around town, and had arrived here in the morning. She’d intended to skip town, but she hadn’t made it that far.

He had sent pursuers after her. Those who shared with her the fate of a killer... those given power by *him*. They seemed to have spread immediately through the city.

She didn’t have the same sight that Yuichi did — eyes that would tell her a person’s true nature — but she could at least identify others of her kind.

Fortunately, it seemed Natsuki's recent abstention from killing had dulled her presence to the other serial killers. It meant that she could detect them, but they couldn't detect her. However, her opponents seemed to have realize that, and simply blocked off all routes out of town.

He had given power directly to 14 individuals, including herself. That wasn't enough people to completely lock down the city... and they weren't all necessarily in the city, either. But they had adherents, and she had heard that some of them had special abilities, too.

For now, all she could do was hide in a place that would make her hard to find, but she knew she couldn't remain in the ruined hospital forever. Abandoned buildings would be the first places they searched.

She could ask someone to take her in and hide her, but she had foolishly let him see her in her school uniform.

Her identity was known.

If they investigated the school, they would learn everything about her. Then they would investigate her handful of friends, and she'd be found right away.

She had a few contacts in the underworld, but seeking help in a world of betrayal and intrigue, in her current condition, would probably end with her even worse off.

If only I'd made up my mind a little sooner... Natsuki thought.

She regretted it. She had wanted to leave town to keep her comrades out of danger, but now it was all for nothing.

Against mere serial killers, Yuichi could probably handle himself... but not *him*. No one could do anything against *him*.

But despite feeling that way, perhaps she had unconsciously begun seeking Yuichi's aid, because the hospital she was hiding in now was close to where he lived.

Mochizuki Gastrointestinal Hospital, otherwise known as the Pink Clinic. It had once been a vampire stronghold, Natsuki had heard, until Yuichi had disrupted that.

Natsuki could sense a faint enemy presence. It was heading right for the hospital.

This was the way it had been, over and over again, since yesterday. After shaking them off, she would be fine for a while... but they always came again.

Natsuki stood up from her chair.

What should she do?

If running away wouldn't solve the problem, then maybe she should try to break through, taking out as many of them as possible on the way. But the reason Natsuki hadn't done that yet was because of *him*.

He was keeping his presence masked for now. That meant he could be coming along with the serial killer. If he was, she didn't stand a chance.

As she wrestled over what to do, her enemy arrived in front of the hospital.

Fight and break through, she decided.

At the same instant, the glass door shattered.

The enemy had thrown something through the door, which rolled to Natsuki's feet.

It looked familiar...

It was Sakiyama's head.

Natsuki froze in shock. That meant she couldn't fully dodge the next thing that came flying...

A spike.

The spike, fifteen centimeters long, struck Natsuki through the right shoulder. She glanced at Sakiyama's head again and noticed several spikes were rammed into it, as well.

"Hello! Big sister's here!" A woman stepped through the broken glass that used to be part of the door.

"Alberta... since when did you become my big sister?" Natsuki asked as she pulled the spike out of her shoulder and tossed it aside. Fortunately, the damage was minor; she could move her arm, which meant she could still fight.

"Well, we are like sisters, aren't we?" the woman asked. "And I became his disciple first, which means I'm the *big* sister."

The woman was wearing a top hat and an old-fashioned riding uniform. The long-skirted black dress also resembled a mourning costume.

Her name was Alberta, and she was a serial killer just like Natsuki.

"How did you know I was here?" Natsuki asked as she reached for the medical scalpels hidden in her uniform and gripped one in each hand. Alberta might not tell her everything, but she might let slip enough information for her to get away.

"That," Alberta said as she pointed at Sakiyama's head. "You

know your big sister is skilled in magic, don't you?"

"I didn't know that, actually." Natsuki knew almost nothing about Alberta's specialties. The only thing she did know was her sadistic personality.

"Oh? What a shock! Well, if you don't know, you don't know, but there's a spell for getting runaways to come home," said Alberta. "I used a form of that, you could say. I cut off his legs, stuck talismans on them, and buried them at a fork in the road. Then, since his body was going to waste, I drove a spike into his navel and stuck spikes around his body to give it a more human form. Of course, in the end I ended up having his head tell me."

She must have run into Sakiyama while he was searching for Natsuki. Sakiyama had been good at stalking, but other than that, he'd been an ordinary human with no special skills. He wouldn't have stood a chance against a serial killer.

Natsuki felt bad for Sakiyama just a little bit. He might have been a stalker creep, but if he hadn't gotten involved with a serial killer, he wouldn't have met such a gruesome fate.

"You took the name Natsuki Takeuchi, right?" Alberta asked. "Then I suppose that's what I'll call you."

"What do you want?"

"I was told to bring you back," Alberta said. "Come along now, would you? Of course, I don't even know why you ran away. It's so strange. You should be glad he came here especially for you."

To Natsuki, they were the ones who were strange, but it would be no use pointing that out.

Alberta produced an axe from beneath her long skirt. "I was told not to kill you, but it seems to me that I can do anything as long as you're not technically dead. Of course, even if you die, it's no big deal! Your big sister is skilled in necromancy, as well!"

With her long skirt fluttering, Alberta charged right in. She raised the rather heavy hand axe with ease, then swung it down.

Natsuki dodged it.

A medical scalpel couldn't exactly block an axe, and while Natsuki's scalpels were stronger than most, so were Alberta's axes. She couldn't cut the axes while she was attacking with them, and their weight was overpowering.

But the weight of the axes gave Natsuki an advantage, too. Both weapons were easy to use, but they differed in their speed.

Once she'd swung the axe, Alberta couldn't heft it again that

quickly, and even if she could, it would be slower than the scalpel. Which meant that Natsuki could counter quickly after she dodged.

Natsuki watched the path of the axe, then tried to swing her scalpel in the brief opening created before Alberta brought it up again.

Instead, though, Natsuki ended up jumping away with a gasp.

The scalpel hadn't reached Alberta — she hadn't even been able to swing it at her.

Her right arm wouldn't move. Rather, it seemed to have a mind of its own, as it moved to cut at herself instead. Natsuki released the scalpel in her left hand so that she could restrain her right arm.

"Oh, sorry to tell you!" Alberta said mockingly. "This battle was actually decided after the very first hit."

Natsuki didn't know the underlying principle — perhaps it was part of the magic Alberta had mentioned — but the first spike Alberta had hit her with appeared to be the cause.

"Natsuki dear, ready to give up?" Alberta smirked. "Or do you still think you can turn things around?"

As Alberta was suggesting, it would be difficult to recover from this. The inability to use her arms was a fatal blow to her. She could still attack with her legs, but she couldn't really hope to defeat Alberta with that alone.

"I guess I should probably dismember you. Then you can't possibly get away." Alberta began advancing slowly, her manner triumphant.

Natsuki kicked at Sakiyama's head at her feet. It was a cruel move, perhaps, but if Sakiyama had been alive, he would probably have gladly let her kick him.

Sakiyama's head didn't hit Alberta, but she hadn't dodged it or knocked it aside. In fact, it hadn't even gone flying at her. Sakiyama's head bit Natsuki's right foot, causing a spike in its mouth to stick into her flesh.

"Natsuki dear... I gave you a hint, you know?" Alberta said. "I told you I was a necromancer. Why are you being so careless?"

Her right leg now had a mind of its own, too. Unable to stand now, Natsuki fell over.

"Natsuki dear, you're so weak. Is it true you haven't been killing at all lately? You used to be stronger, didn't you?"

Maybe it was true that she had gotten weaker. It was possible that she couldn't have beaten Alberta back then, either, but she

would have at least put up a decent fight.

“Well, I’ve taken your right arm and right leg already, so let’s do our cutting on the left side first,” said Alberta.

Natsuki began racking her brain for a plan, but nothing came to mind. She couldn’t think of any way to fight back with the parts of her body she still had control of. She didn’t want to give up, but there was nothing she could do.

Alberta raised her axe high.

Natsuki glared at her attacker.

That was all that she could do — but even if she was about to die, she wouldn’t turn her eyes away from it. Natsuki still had her pride.

Alberta’s axe came down.

There was a high-pitched sound of something whistling through the air, and then the axe went flying in a different direction.

Natsuki saw it happen. The axe, and Alberta’s right arm, had both gone flying with the same force with which she’d brought them swinging down.

Natsuki and Alberta looked at each other.

They both seemed equally surprised.

The arm and the axe hit the wall with a bang.

“Hello, there,” came a voice from behind Alberta.

Alberta turned back. Natsuki could see the speaker, as well.

It was a young woman who looked like an office worker, holding a pair of blood-stained scissors in her hand.

Chapter 3: It's Kind of Like a Prologue, I Guess

It was Saturday, a little while after noon. Yuichi had come alone to this restaurant, Nihao the China.

It was a Chinese restaurant near the back gate of the school, and it was where his classmate, Tomomi Hamasaki, lived.

He opened the old door and entered to find four people waiting inside.

One was a man, sitting past the counter in the kitchen and reading a newspaper. The label above his head was "Nihao the China," the same name as the restaurant, and he wore his hair in a braid that seemed ridiculously inappropriate for both the time period and the country he lived in.

Two customers sat at a round table across from each other. One was Aiko Noro. The other was Monika Sakurazaki, leader of the Monika Army.

Monika was a girl dressed in an elementary school uniform, wearing her hair in a ponytail. She looked like a young girl, but only because she had stopped aging — her actual age was around Yuichi's own. As an Outer, a being that existed outside of destiny, she had no label over her head.

The last person was the waitress, who was standing in the back, dressed in a cheongsam, looking restless. This was his classmate, Tomomi Hamasaki.

She lived upstairs and helped out at the restaurant. She wore glasses at school, but she seemed to take them off while she was working. Yuichi wasn't sure why she wore the glasses, which appeared to be strictly for fashion purposes.

Above her head was the label "Real."

Huh? Yuichi hesitated.

Normally, Tomomi's label was "Fake," and this had never changed in all the time he'd known her.

When he looked a bit closer, he noticed that she seemed restless

and troubled somehow. And when he looked her over more closely, he sensed that her aura seemed a bit different from the Tomomi he usually saw in class. In other words, she was a different person.

Yuichi looked at Aiko. Aiko looked back at him with an uncomfortable frown.

“W-Welcome!” Tomomi called out, her voice slightly shrill. The voice itself was the same, but the tone was completely different.

Yuichi sat down next to Aiko.

“Sakaki! Doesn’t Tomomi seem weird somehow?” Aiko asked him immediately. She looked like she desperately wanted to talk to someone about it.

It was true that Monika didn’t know Tomomi very well, so she probably wasn’t well suited to talk to about it.

“Definitely weird,” said Yuichi. “Actually, I think she’s a totally different person from the one we usually talk to.”

“I think you’re right... but she looks just like her, doesn’t she?” Aiko asked.

“Yeah. Appearance-wise, they’re identical. Her body is just like it was when we saw her yesterday.”

“Her body... have you been staring at her, Sakaki?!” Aiko’s expression suggested he was looking at her in some improper way.

“I wasn’t staring!” Yuichi retorted. “She just puts herself in my line of sight, that’s all.”

“Well, fine. But why has she changed? Did the real Tomomi go off somewhere?”

“Well... this might complicate things, but the label on the Hamasaki we usually see is ‘Fake.’ The one standing here right now has the label ‘Real.’” It had occurred to him that if there was a fake, there must be a real one. Of course, he’d only ever seen the fake, so he’d never thought he’d end up meeting the real one at this point.

“Hey! Would you two knock off the insider chat already?” Monika seemed angry that she was being ignored now. “Yuichi, you said you called us here because you had something to talk about!”

“We’re trying to work out a mystery, but I guess it’s not that important right now,” Yuichi said. It was true that the presence of the “real” Tomomi wasn’t actually relevant to the subject at hand.

He decided he would just ask her about it later, and was about to move on, when he saw it: the “Fake” label.

Another Tomomi had appeared.

Nihao the China was a two-story building. The first floor was a

store, while the second floor was their living space. The fake Tomomi was walking down the stairs from the second floor.

“Huh? Two Tomomis?” Aiko was openly surprised.

Wearing the same cheongsam, their hair in buns, they really were perfectly identical.

The fake Tomomi walked up to the real one and whispered something to her. The real one nodded in response and headed up to the second floor in her place.

“Um... do you have a... twin sister, Tomomi?” Aiko asked without hiding her surprise. That did seem to be the rational explanation.

“Oh, no, I don’t!” Tomomi said. “So, thanks for coming! What’ll you have?”

FAKE
REAL

It was plainly suspicious, but Yuichi didn't press the issue. He'd had plenty of chances to ask about the "Fake" label in the past. If he finally asked now, he'd feel like he'd lost some sort of battle. "I'll have soy sauce ramen."

"You're not gonna ask? We were being really obvious about it..." Tomomi said, a little irritated.

"Because I'm pretty sure the story's gonna be complicated, and I'm in no mood to get mixed up in it!"

"Tsk!" Tomomi clicked her tongue, behavior unbecoming of service staff.

"Besides, aren't you trying to hide it? You shouldn't try to be obvious about it..."

"I guess not," she said. "If you'd asked, I was gonna put on airs about it, though."

Yuichi winced in response to Tomomi's frank words. It didn't especially matter to him if Tomomi was a "fake," anyway. If she was ever in trouble, then he'd be happy to help her, regardless.

Of course, I doubt she'd ever be willing to ask for help...

Aiko and Monika put in their orders, and Tomomi went to the kitchen to convey them.

"So, what was it?" Aiko asked, stunned.

"I'm not interested in asking. Noro, do you want to ask next time?"

"Hmm..."

"Hey, how long are you going to drag this out?" Monika said in annoyance, as if she'd finally snapped.

Yuichi had called Monika here because he had something to talk about. He'd told her most of it on the phone, but he'd wanted to reveal the details face to face.

"Sorry," he said. "The first thing I wanted to say is that there was a resonance, like I told you on the phone."

"Yeah," she said. "No one seemed to come after me, though."

Monika was hiding in the oni settlement for protection. He'd called her to tell her to be on her guard, but it seemed nothing had happened.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, but you shouldn't stay in the same place for too long," he said. It was possible they'd found where she was living. Part of Divine Vessels War strategy was to move

somewhere else after each resonance.

"Yeah," she said. "It seems the oni people have a few different hideouts, so they'll move me to another of them. What else did you learn?"

"There were two Divine Vessel hosts close to the school. That's about all. The resonance died down after a few minutes, so I guess something got settled somewhere."

Resonance took place between all Divine Vessels. Generally, hosts could use that as a guide to search out fellow hosts and fight. Any time something was settled between any two parties, the resonance would die down for a while.

"So me and Dannoura decided to explore the place those two seemed to have been," Yuichi said.

Naturally, the Divine Vessel hosts might not be there anymore, but they still couldn't just bring non-combatants along. That was why the two of them had gone there alone.

The site had been the pedestrian walkway about halfway between the school and the station. There had been clear signs of a fight there: the sign on a nearby building was bent inwards, and the tiles of the sidewalk were cracked.

The cracks in the tiles seemed to have been caused by someone stepping on them with great force, unleashing a strike powerful enough to send someone flying into a building.

"That was about all we learned," said Yuichi. "We still didn't know who had fought there, but then we saw this woman at the scene..."

"Serial God Killer" had been the label, and it had sent a genuine shock through Yuichi.

It had been an extremely disconcerting sight. Yuichi had watched the woman closely, wondering who she was.

She'd worn the uniform of a certain famous bank, and had been quite beautiful despite not wearing makeup. She had seemed to be searching for something, just as Yuichi was.

"Then we made eye contact..."

When they'd done that, for some reason, tears had fallen from the woman's eyes. She'd turned her face away and then left quickly.

"And then you remembered?" Monika asked after a pause. The fact that she'd guessed what had happened suggested she had an idea who this woman was.

"I remembered the time I first met you, but I don't know

anything about what happened before or after," Yuichi said. "So I need you to fill in the blanks. Now that I've remembered, you can do that without the whatsit ability's restrictions holding you back, right?"

Yuichi was referring to Monika's ability, "Distant Memories," which came with her worldview, "A Hopelessly Romantic Little World." It was the ability to erase memories, which she apparently used to make romances more interesting. As long as that ability was still functioning, even if someone explained the circumstances of his memory loss to him, he wouldn't be able to understand it. Of course, the memories hadn't actually disappeared, she had said at the time. They could be unlocked under the right conditions.

"Yeah, now that that's done, I probably can explain," she said. "And I probably should, too."

Yuichi nodded. "At the time, I didn't think anything of it, but now that I remember, I understand... That woman is one of the reasons I ended up with Soul Reader, right?"

"Which means she's hanging out around here again, huh?" Monika groaned.

Just then, a slightly smooshed little white sphere appeared from above her shoulder, looking like a daifuku mochi with eyes and a mouth. "Long time no see, Yuichi!"

"Oh yeah, I forgot about you..." he muttered.

It was apparently an imaginary creature that was the personification of the debt that Monika owed Yuichi. It would exist until Monika paid back what she owed him... which meant that she hadn't yet done so.

"Well, let's talk about what happened that day!" the daifuku announced.

"Wait a minute! Why are you leading the conversation?" Yuichi shot back.

"The thought of letting Monika handle the explanation by herself makes me nervous," the daifuku said. "I think she might leave out things she doesn't want you to hear. I'm a neutral party, so don't worry!"

"Well, okay. It's just a little unsettling to remember getting attacked out of the blue, and not know why."

Knowing the reason why now might not change anything, necessarily, but he thought it might be useful reference in his decisions hereafter.

Together, the daifuku and Monika began to describe what had happened over spring vacation.

*****

Monika Sakurazaki thought back to how it had all gotten started.

It was hard to tell exactly what the triggering event had been.

Maybe it had been when Monika became an Outer, or when she'd decided to start participating in their world. Maybe the beginning of it all was something far earlier. But this was the story about how Monika had gotten involved with Yuichi Sakaki, so perhaps it would be best to start with the events that had directly led to him ending up with Soul Reader.

In that case, the start of it all was a girl named Ende.

"You want to go back to normal?" Ende called out to Monika.

She was walking down a hallway made from bookshelves on her way out from a gathering that Ende had arranged.

How long had she been there? The girl named Ende, red-haired and wearing an old dress, was leaning against one of the shelves, a book in one hand.

The perfection of her timing sent a chill up Monika's spine; that was one of the traits those monstrous Outers possessed that had caused her to get disgusted and try to slip out.

For a long time, she'd been shouting, "No more! I want to go back to normal!" in her mind.

"What? Did you just read my mind or something?" she asked as she stopped and glared at Ende.

Apparently Ende had the power to influence worlds, so it wouldn't be surprising for her to have the power to read minds.

"Oh, no," said Ende. "You should know very well that I can't do that. We may be treated as gods, but we can't do as much as everyone thinks. It's just that it's so obvious what you're thinking. I know it from experience... This is your fifth year, isn't it, Monika? It's just about the time for you to start to waver."

"Don't talk to me like you understand!" Monika snapped. "I'm fed up! Fed up with you guys, who don't think of people as people, and with myself, for getting used to it! The thought that I might start becoming like you... an inhuman monster! A miscreant!"

The meetings Ende held didn't have any particular agenda

behind them, but they had naturally turned into participants telling stories of the worlds they'd gotten involved in and influenced.

"Yeah," said Ende. "So you didn't like that particular story, huh? But that kind of thing is popular lately, you know? Having allies die off one by one just like that. It might not seem fair, but it also includes foreshadowing that makes it necessary to solve the puzzle. It's got lots of impact. Of course, personally, I think it gets boring if that's all you do. Makina in particular likes to push for the bad end even if it means a loss of story cohesiveness... Although personally, I find it monotonous and predictable."

It was an unsettling thing to say, and it made Monika want to clamp her hands over her ears. The way they told each other those stories so gleefully...

"How... how can you talk like that? These aren't characters in a story that you're killing! They're real people who are just trying to live in peace! They'd be able to live long and happy lives if you people didn't interfere!"

"Well, that's the road everyone goes down," said Ende, brushing off Monika's anger. "But you get used to it, in a way. It becomes the only enjoyment you have. You should take a more objective view of the world. We're bystanders. We should just enjoy the stories."

Ende showed no signs of caring about what she had to say. Monika began to feel like she was speaking to a being from another dimension. Then again, perhaps they really were beings from another dimension... and Monika was starting to take her first steps down that road, as well.

"So? What do you want?" Monika demanded. "You can't have come here to tell me that."

She couldn't imagine Ende would object so strongly to her sneaking out of the meeting. There must have been another reason.

"Normally I'd just leave you be... you'll give in soon enough, either way. But I just happened to find this..." Ende tossed the book she was reading to Monika.

Monika always found it strange that Ende was so careless with her books. She caught the book and looked it over carefully. It was trade paperback size, and the cover was blank.

"What is this?"

"It's a silly little story about a low-born girl named Wakana Morishita who falls in love with a prince-like rich boy. At least, it was supposed to be..."

“Wakana...” The mention of the name caused Monika to hesitate. Why did Ende know it? It was the name of the best friend Monika couldn’t forget, no matter how hard she tried.

“You’d know this if you read it, but she has a best friend named Monika Sakurazaki,” said Ende. “Around the time Wakana enters fifth grade, though, Monika stops appearing. She didn’t die, or disappear, or transfer schools... she just stops appearing. Of course, I’m sure you know the reason why. It’s because you were ejected from your world.”

“So what?!” Monika snapped.

One day, when she was in fifth grade, Monika had been abruptly ejected from her world. It had happened suddenly, without forewarning. All of a sudden, her parents and her friends had stopped acknowledging her existence.

It wasn’t that she’d been invisible; she’d been able to speak to them and interact with them. But they would treat her like a total stranger. If she introduced herself as Monika Sakurazaki, they would call her that, but their fundamental relationships would have changed.

“‘A Hopelessly Romantic Little World.’ That’s the name of the world you came from,” Ende said.

Ende gave names to the various worlds she had discovered. As far as Monika knew, Ende was the oldest of them, so almost nobody ever quarreled with her about her naming sense.

All worlds were governed by rules, which they referred to as “worldviews.” The embodiment of a worldview was known as a Worldview Holder, the person who dictated the direction of that world. Monika now knew that she was one of these special people. But it was realizing that, and realizing the ways in which she could actively manipulate her world, that had resulted in her ejection from it.

“That’s just the name you gave it, isn’t it?” Monika said.

“It’s a bittersweet story set in the modern day, a tale of ordinary girls and boys...” Ende wasn’t interested in listening to Monika’s pain. She was just saying what she wanted to say. “Thanks to your loss of influence there, the story has started to go a bit off the rails. Wakana Morishita is now 15 years old. She’ll be starting high school next month, but the environment around her has been growing exponentially more dangerous. The rich boy has disappeared, and the ones now in love with Wakana are twelve

psychopaths."

"What?!" The shocking development left Monika dumbstruck.

"See, I was hoping to enjoy Wakana's sweet love affair as a comforting palate-cleanser," said Ende. "Like I said before, there have been too many blood-and-guts stories lately. I'd like to enjoy the story as it was originally meant to be. But at this rate, Wakana... well, they're in love with her, so I'm sure they won't kill her *immediately*..."

Monika wasn't listening to Ende at all. The only thing she could think about was that she had to save Wakana, somehow. But nothing was coming to mind. Her thoughts just kept racing in circles.

Being thrown out of the world she was associated with allowed her to exert influence on other worlds, but it meant that she couldn't influence her old world in any way. Maybe she could ask the others for help, but she doubted that those monsters who didn't think of people as people would really want to save Wakana.

"...So the only way is to put you back to normal," Ende finished. "And that's why I addressed you."

"Is this supposed to be a joke?" Monika snapped. "There's no way for me to go back to normal!"

"Oh, but there is," Ende countered lightly.

"Then why don't you people use it?!"

"Well, it's like you said before. We've all become beings who take pleasure from peering in on other worlds and tinkering with them. The thought of going back to the way things were before, living out our lives as mere characters in a story, is not exactly appealing."

"Can't you save Wakana yourself?" Monika demanded. If she wanted to see how the story was supposed to unfold, then maybe Ende could do it. Monika wondered why she'd had to talk to her about it at all.

"I'm not great with romance. I doubt sticking my hand into the situation would improve it at all," Ende said with theatrical defeatism.

"So... how do I go back to normal? You're the ones who told me that once you're thrust out of destiny, you can never return!" Monika said heatedly.

That was what she'd been told, and why she was so suspicious of Ende's talk about being able to go back now. At the same time,

those words were her only hope.

"You've been driven out of your world," said Ende. "You can't return to your world. You can't influence your own world... That's the way it is, but there's no reason that's how it has to be. You are driven out from the world, but what you've been driven out into is just another world governed by different logic. You could say that the world we exist in now just exists on a meta level above our original worlds. But are the rules that govern us absolute? Might there be a rule that would let us influence our original worlds again?"

"You said before that there was a way, right? Stop putting on airs!"

"Aren't you impatient? Ah, well..." Ende said with a shrug, then approached Monika. She took Monika's hand and pressed something into it.

"What?" Monika looked at the object in her hand.

It was an eyeball.

"Eek!" Monika nearly threw it away reflexively.

"Hey! Don't drop that. It's pretty valuable. It's probably not that easy to damage, but just in case, you know?"

"What is this thing?!" Monika shrieked.

"The Evil God's eye. Well, the Evil God is just a name I give it... just imagine it as being a sort of nebulously bad entity. It's your ticket to participate in the story of the Evil God, where the winner gets a wish. I'm giving it to you."

Monika looked at the eyeball in surprise. Now that she mentioned it, it did look rather sinister, but it also looked artificial.

Right Eye of the Evil God (Eye of Red Cords)
Potential: B+
Description: Part of the Evil God's body, also known as a Divine Vessel.
The host it possesses will be able to visualize the romantic connections of anyone they look at in the form of red lines.
Divine Vessels resonate with each other at odd intervals, telling their hosts the general location of the other Divine Vessels.
To become its host, you must press it into your own eye.
The vessel will be released if you lose a battle to another vessel host.

“Uh oh! You observed it, huh?” Ende said, again theatrically.

“Observing” was one power of an Outer’s eyes; they had the ability to see the roles that people and things held within their own worldview.

“What do you mean?” Monika asked suspiciously.

Ende had clearly held back on purpose. When looking at something suspicious, any Outer would unconsciously use the power of their eyes.

“Its power was determined the moment you observed it,” said Ende.

“Why didn’t you tell me that from the start?!”

“Well, I think it’s fine. It’s interesting in its own way, isn’t it?”

Eyes of Red Cords. Given its description, it must have been influenced by Monika’s worldview, “A Hopelessly Romantic Little World.” If she’d known that in advance, she would have picked a more useful ability. As it was now, it was effectively useless. Ende seemed to be doing what she did out of spite, or at least to surprise her.

“So, can making a wish really put me back to normal?” Monika asked, after recovering her calm.

“What do you think?”

Monika was getting fed up with Ende’s cryptic lack of answers. What was the point of saying all this if that wasn’t the case?

“I mean, no one’s ever tried it,” said Ende. “But it seems possible, doesn’t it? If it’s true that it can grant *any* wish, it should be able to grant a wish to turn you back to normal. If you can outmaneuver all the other participants and the Evil God himself, you can get your wish granted... though of course, that’s easier said than done.”

Ende smiled innocently.

Monika couldn’t help but think that she didn’t care about Wakana at all.

*****

Several days had passed since Monika had acquired the Evil God’s right eye.

She was starting to get desperate.

At the end of spring vacation, Wakana Morishita would be entering high school. She had to do something before that

happened.

Wakana's destiny was on hold for now, but when she entered high school, it would start moving again.

Apparently there would be twelve psychopaths attending Wakana's new high school. Wakana's world was about to change from a love story to a psycho thriller.

Monika wanted to save Wakana. To do that, she had to get her back to her original world, and put her best friend's destiny back on track.

Even if she could do something about the guys coming after Wakana, if the world Wakana was involved in had fundamentally changed, someone else still might come after her.

Besides, an Outer could not interfere in their own original world in any way. She could get someone else to act as an intermediary, but there was no guarantee that that would work out. Therefore, she had no choice but to assemble the Divine Vessels to make that wish.

As a host to one of the Evil God's body parts, she could use the resonance to hunt down the other parts. When all the parts came to dwell within one person, the Evil God would be revived, and then he would grant that person's wish. That was what Ende had told her, at least.

Of course, Evil God is just something we call him for expedience, Ende had explained. *In actuality, he's a Worldview Holder with a powerful influence. If we let him roam free, he might destroy the world. And miscreants though we may be, we can't let the world itself and the intelligent beings who live there be destroyed. We want to enjoy the world and the stories within it. That means we are, in essence, fundamentally opposed to the Evil God. So apparently, a long time ago, we all worked together to destroy the Evil God, but someone decided it would be a shame to eliminate his power entirely. Letting him revive partly or fully every now and then, to rampage and then get defeated again... it adds a little spice to life, don't you think?*

Her words had made it all the more clear that neither the Evil God nor the Outers were anyone she wanted to associate with.

In other words, they had orchestrated the entire thing. Outers loved stories about worlds getting destroyed.

But no matter how rotten the story behind it might be, it was Monika's only option.

She had a vague feeling that Ende was manipulating her, but

she couldn't think of any other way to do what she needed to. So Monika went out into town, searching for someone to be a host to a Divine Vessel.

Ende and her fellow Outers likened the rules that governed worlds to stories. Monika could think about things that way too, and like all Outers, she had the ability to view trends in stories and identify roles and key items. She did this via an ability that Mutsuko Sakaki would later call Soul Reader, though at this point in time it was just a basic ability all Outers had, and no one had given it a name.

At this time, Monika's eyes could still see labels. They hovered over a person's head and explained their role in their affiliated story.

Things like "High School Student" "Office Worker" or "Housewife" didn't mean much. Those labels meant that they didn't play any significant role in their story.

These ordinary people — these "extras" — were out of bounds. She had to find someone special instead, but this was proving difficult.

The first issue was getting others to believe her story, although this had proven surprisingly simple.

Many of those she had talked to had already known the story about Divine Vessels, and those that didn't had readily believed in the idea of getting a wish granted. The problem lay in the compensation that Monika could offer them.

Only one wish could be granted, and Monika intended to use that wish herself, which meant there was nothing in it for the host. Monika wasn't good at lying, so she hadn't been able to spin the offer in a convincing way.

Monika had certain powers as an Outer, but those were limited to helping people in love. It was possible there was someone out there who would risk their life to get a bit closer to someone they cared about, but so far, none of the people she had talked to were terribly passionate romantics.

That meant all that Monika had to offer was the Divine Vessel itself.

It was the Evil God's right eye, also known as the Eye of Red Cords. It offered its host the ability to see threads of romantic destiny, the result of the eye being influenced by Monika's powers the moment she had "observed" it.

Who would even want this ability? she thought.

It would be hard for her to ask someone to go into combat under these conditions.

That left only combat junkies interested in the fight itself as an option, but she had yet to meet anyone like that. Every negotiation Monika had tried so far had ended in failure.

I need to figure out something...

Panicked and restless, she was walking her patrol of the city around noon.

It would have looked suspicious for an apparent elementary school student like Monika to be wandering around in public during the day, but fortunately, Outers were fundamentally inconspicuous.

Unfortunately, few of the sorts of powerful beings that could be of use to Monika would be just wandering around in public during the day, either.

Perhaps she needed a more efficient way of searching.

Maybe I should go somewhere a little shiftier...

Walking around at night might increase her chances, and she could try visiting the sorts of abandoned buildings and graveyards where yokai and monsters tended to lurk. But there was a simple reason she hadn't gone to places like that already: she was scared.

Her Outer status made her effectively impossible to kill, but she still only had the life experience of a fifth grader. No matter how mature she might claim to be, she remained childish in many ways.

Okay! If today proves to be a bust, I'll expand my range tomorrow...

Just as Monika was coming to her decision, her eyes fell upon a label.

"Serial God Killer."

It was a label she'd never seen before. She decided to investigate further.

"Serial God Killer" seemed to be a young woman dressed in the uniform of an employee of a prestigious bank. Her uniform was unadorned and her makeup was natural. Her hair was tied into a prim ponytail. It was probably the way bank employees usually dressed, but her plain mode of dress couldn't hide the bewitching aura behind it.

It was around noon, so Monika assumed she must be out for lunch. Since there was no bank in the direction she was heading, she must not have eaten yet.

Monika tailed the Serial God Killer, keeping her distance as she

pondered how best to approach her. She shouldn't just address the woman on the street. She still looked like a child, after all, and the woman might just brush her off if she tried.

Which meant she'd just have to wait for her to arrive at her destination. Then she could sit down and focus her energies on trying to convince her.

There was no particular reason to be fixated on this woman. It was just that she hadn't found any other suitable person to deal with, and if this woman killed gods, Monika assumed she must be strong. The thought of whether or not she could control her hadn't even entered her mind.

If the woman said no, she'd just ask someone else, and as an Outer, Monika was nearly unkillable. No matter how strong this woman was, she could probably get away from her.

Besides, unlike the yokai and monsters who inhabited the world's darker half, this woman seemed to have integrated into human society. That might make her more likely to listen.

The woman she was tailing eventually turned onto a side street. She turned again and again through the winding alleys until they wound up at a cul-de-sac.

Maybe this was a mistake... Monika wondered if she'd been led into a trap.

While she stewed over whether or not to run away, the woman kept walking forward, eventually descending a staircase at the end of the street.

Monika walked up to the staircase and peered down it. The woman was gone.

There was a door at the bottom of the staircase — a cafe, judging by the sign.

"Well, no point in turning back now..." Monika steeled her nerve and began to descend.

The cafe had dim lighting and a dingy sort of feel to it. It didn't seem like the sort of place where a bank employee would eat lunch.

Just inside the entrance was a corridor that extended straight in front of her. To her left was bar seating. The kitchen lay beyond. Across from it, to her right, were five tables with seats.

The Serial God Killer woman was the cafe's only customer, sitting at the rearmost table. The only other person there was an old man dressed in an apron who was standing behind the counter.

The label above the apparent barkeep's head read "Serial

Killer," suggesting that the two likely knew each other. Serial God Killer and Serial Killer — it would be odd for such similar labels to end up in the same place purely by coincidence.

Maybe it really was a trap.

Despite that, though, Monika remained fairly calm. She really wasn't very worried about the chance that they might hurt her. To put it simply, Outers were extremely lucky. They tended not to end up in situations that might prove fatal.

The woman and the old man looked at Monika standing in the entrance. But of course, a young girl coming alone to a seedy old cafe in the back alleys would attract attention.

"Welcome," the man said softly, as if nothing at all were amiss.

"Did you want something from me?" the woman asked. "Please, do stop standing there and come over."

It was a reasonable request; Monika had tailed her into the deserted back alleys, after all. She had been trying to be inconspicuous, but perhaps the woman had known she was there from the start.

Despite all of her preparation, though, Monika hadn't actually thought through what she should do when they finally met. At the same time, she also couldn't just remain standing there forever. Monika walked up to the woman's table and took a seat across from her.

"All right," the woman said. "I have to say, I found this all quite strange. I couldn't think of any reason why a little girl like you might be following me." The woman had her head tilted in an elegant way. She probably found it genuinely baffling.

Most people wouldn't know she was a "Serial God Killer," and even if they did, it would probably be hard to imagine anyone going out of their way to address someone so dangerous.

"I want you to join me," Monika said.

She decided to charge right into the main subject. It was all about impact. If she could pique her interest from the start, that might make everything go more smoothly.

Snip.

There was a sudden sound near Monika's ear. The woman was leaning over the table, her right hand close to Monika's head. Monika hadn't even seen her move. One moment the woman was sitting back; the next moment she was right beside her.

Monika slowly turned her head.

There was a pair of sewing shears in the woman's hand, closed.

A moment later, Monika's heart began to pound.

She couldn't die. She knew that, but it was hard to remain calm while on the receiving end of this sort of open threat.

"Oh? I missed." The woman looked genuinely surprised. "I wonder why..."

She hadn't missed on purpose, then. She seemed extremely perplexed about the result, which suggested she had tremendous confidence in her skills.

There had been no room for discussion; this woman had tried to kill Monika right off the bat, acting with a terrifying degree of decisiveness.

"Th-That was pretty out of nowhere. But it won't work, you know!" Monika said loudly, to try to cover the trembling in her voice.

"You see, there were all these questions going through my mind," the woman said. "Why would an elementary school girl be following me? Why would she want me to join her? What benefit would it be to me? Did she know these are my hunting grounds? Does she know I'm a killer? Is she in the same profession? It was growing tiresome, so I decided I'd just kill you. Then I wouldn't have to think about it anymore."

"Didn't you consider any of the consequences, ma'am?" Monika was starting to think she'd acted too hastily. There was no way she could keep such a short-tempered partner in line. *Though decisiveness and speed like that could come in handy...*

People could die in the Divine Vessels War. The event's bloodthirsty nature demanded a strong playing piece.

To save Wakana, she'd have to look the other way about some terrible things. Monika decided to force herself to accept that.

"Don't worry about that," the woman said dismissively. "This area is my hunting grounds; I can dispose of a corpse or two easily enough. The fact that you called me 'ma'am' is making me want to kill you even more, but it seems that won't be very easy, so I suppose I'll hear you out." The woman sat back in her seat.

Monika rubbed her chest to calm herself down. "Ma'am, are you human?"

"That's a good question. I'm certainly called inhuman often enough." Her words suggested that she was human.

"Okay, I'll explain everything," Monika said. "But will you

please hear me out to the end? No trying to kill me halfway through?"

"Your name."

"Huh?"

"Mine is Aki Takizawa. And yours?"

"Monika Sakurazaki."

"All right, Monika dear. I'll hear you out. But as you can see, I'm a bit impatient. Keep it brief."

Monika found her more than a *bit* impatient, but she decided to keep that opinion to herself. She didn't know what else she might try. "I'm a being that exists outside of destiny. Attacks from people who exist within destiny, like you, won't hurt me. People like me can also see information about people who exist within destiny. That's how I knew you were a Serial God Killer."

"I'd like to dismiss you as just a crazy girl, but my attacks genuinely don't work on you, so I'll trust you there," said the woman. "So, what would I get out of joining you?"

"I've been thinking about taking part in a game, and I need a piece to act on my behalf. As for what you get out of it... whoever wins this game will gain tremendous power. You'll get a part of that, and I'd also be in a position to guarantee you a happy and full life. In addition—" Monika was hesitant to tell her about the wish, so instead, she was keeping it vague. Observing love connections could be helpful, and it wasn't a lie to say that it might help you lead a happy life.

"A happy and full life? What does that include, exactly?" Aki seemed absolutely baffled by the concept.

"Well, you'd be able to marry a good man, have children, live comfortably, and die with contentment... more or less?" Monika said hesitantly. She could manipulate destiny to a certain degree even without the Evil God's help, after all.

While Monika was thinking about that, a quiet smile appeared on Aki's face.

Huh?! Monika suddenly realized she had misunderstood something.

"Marrying, having children, and living out a comfortable life... you call that happiness?!" Aki suddenly cried out, and Monika felt a chill rush down her spine.

It was a little frightening; she had no idea what she had done wrong.

“Huh? Why are you so mad?” Monika stuttered. “You don’t want a comfortable and happy family life?”

The woman shook her head. She didn’t seem terribly angry, but her expression was that of someone dealing with an unbelievably stupid child. “All right. I dislike misunderstandings, so allow me to explain. Happiness, to me... must be built on the happiness of others.”

“Um... you mean like, ‘If you’re happy, I’m happy’?” Monika was a bit surprised. This woman certainly didn’t seem like the deeply empathetic type.

The woman instantly dashed that. “Isn’t tormenting happy people just the most ecstatic feeling?”

“Oh, I see. People’s unhappiness is like ambrosia to you.” In her shock, Monika found herself resorting to politeness.

“You knew I killed people, didn’t you?” the woman asked. “But I particularly specialize in people who look happy. Flirting couples are a particular specialty of mine.”

“Um, my sight told me you were a Serial God Killer, so I assumed you only killed gods...”

“If I saw gods flirting, I’d kill them, too.”

If gods were flirting, she’d kill them. Monika suddenly realized she was dealing with a “normie” killer.

“You can’t be jealous, though, right?” Monika asked. “You’re beautiful. You could get any man you wanted.”

“Happiness is like a balloon. I’m the kind of person who delights in popping balloons. Happiness breaks so easily, after all. Why would I seek out something so fleeting? Why should I be dependent on something so easily destroyed?”

Her system of values was clearly an alien one. Monika was starting to think this wouldn’t work at all. It was hard to see how she could ever get along with someone like this.

“Um, maybe we really should just—” *—call this off,* she tried to say, but Aki interrupted.

“Earlier, you suggested that I would get something else out of this.”

“No, it was really nothing...” Monika tried to defer and leave, but Aki wouldn’t be dissuaded.

“I’ll be the judge of that.” It felt like the woman had taken total control of the conversation at this point.

Well, if she still wants to hear me out... Monika decided to

continue.

"In order to participate in the game, you'll need to become a host to a thing called a Divine Vessel. It'll let you use a certain superpower, though the one I have to offer isn't very good..."

"A superpower? If it would let me explode people's heads with a thought, or set them on fire, I'd love it."

Monika didn't even want to think about how she intended to use such things. Even if she did have a power like that, she would never give it to someone like her. "It's not like that. It's called magic sight. The only ability I can give you is the ability to see red cords."

Red cords: threads that indicated that two people would be together in the future. The magic sight had, for some reason, morphed into that ability.

"Oh? If that's what it is, I'll happily work with you. That's all the reward I want, as well."

Monika was shocked by Aki's assent. "Maybe I shouldn't say this, but it's really not that impressive. Magic sight generally doesn't let you see stuff about yourself, so you wouldn't be able to see who you're tied to..."

"I'm telling you, I don't mind. Go ahead and hand it over." Aki held out her hand expectantly.

"Huh?" Monika said. "Don't you want to hear what kind of game it is, or what the conditions are? Accepting the magic sight means you're participating in the game..."

Despite the woman's enthusiasm, Monika found herself balking. Was it really okay to take this woman as her ally? Could she really trust her? If she couldn't, could she find a way to make use of her?

That's right. There's no point in having someone innocent on my side.

Monika had to get all the Divine Vessels and have her wish granted, no matter what. She steeled herself and handed the Evil God's right eye to Aki. "Just push it into your eye."

Without hesitation, Aki took possession of the Evil God's right eye.

"I'm surprised by how easily you took it... I mean, you believe the whole story?"

"I can't see anything," Aki said, looking at Monika while failing to answer her question.

"Of course you can't. You can't see your own red cords, and

since I exist outside of destiny, I don't have any."

Upon hearing that, Aki looked past Monika to the corridor. "I see. The barkeeper does have them." The old man who manned the bar had just arrived at their table with coffee, which Aki must have ordered before Monika arrived. "Hey, barkeep. Could you stay right there a moment?"

The barkeeper faithfully did as he was told. Aki whipped her scissors forward.

Snip.

The scissors sliced through thin air.

"What did you do?"

"Hmm? Oh, I just wanted to try something. It seems I can cut the red cords."

"Hey! What are you trying to—" But her next movement was once again too swift for Monika's eyes to follow.

There was another snip, and then pain.

Monika clamped a hand to her ear. The slimy sensation sent a chill down her spine.

Her ear had been cut open. Monika sat where she was, dumbfounded.

There was blood dripping down her neck.

Chapter 4: Let's Finally Talk About Yuichi's Spring Vacation

"How..." Monika cut off.

Aki shouldn't have been able to hurt her, yet she clearly had.

The scissors were next to her ear, trembling from effort. Normally a weapon like that would break when used against an Outer, but these held their form.

"I'm sorry, Monika dear. I'm the type to lie for no good reason... I actually knew all about Outers and the Evil God and the Divine Vessel War."

Monika's eyes opened wide. So she really had been lured into a trap.

"Oh, and don't think I missed the first time on purpose. It's just that I need to try a few times before I finally hit. What did you think a God Killer was? Oh, or are you wondering why my scissors are still intact? That's simple. I'm extremely good at wielding my scissors. They're like an extension of my body."

Monika sat there, dumbstruck. It was true that Outers were generally thought of as gods... so she was an Outer Killer, then? And that meant she could harm Monika...

Monika sprung out of her seat and went running.

The scissors whisked against her shoulder.

It wasn't enough to kill her yet, but enough scratches like these would eventually take a toll.

The barkeeper — the old "Serial Killer" — moved to block her path.

"Forget!"

Monika invoked her Outer ability "Distant Memories," the power to make others forget that they had met.

The ability had a number of restrictions, but it worked in this case. She had only just met the barkeeper today, in this cafe, which meant he would lose all memory of Monika ever arriving there.

The barkeeper stopped, confused by the sight of an unknown

girl suddenly appearing before him. With him standing stock still, Monika could slip past him and run for the exit.

She climbed up the stairs and looked back. Aki wasn't pursuing.

Monika took off into a run, trying to escape the back streets, but she suddenly tripped and fell onto her backside.

For a moment, she thought she'd just lost her balance in her haste, but then she felt a tug on her right arm and went pale.

"So sorry," the woman said tauntingly. "I fastened a red cord to you before..."

It should have been impossible. The magical sight shouldn't have that ability. Yet Aki was slowly climbing the stairway, her hand winding coquettishly as if playing with something.

"Wh-Who are you?! Why are you doing this?" Monika stammered.

"I'm just your average, garden variety killer... or God Killer, perhaps? But these eyes you gave me are just so useful. Originally I'd just thought they would help me to find flirting couples, but they seem to have so many other uses..."

Aki could cut the red cords, tie them, and pull on them. It was unbelievable, yet it was clearly true. Monika would have to take that into account with anything else she tried.

That meant she couldn't just run away. As long as Aki had her hands on that cord, Monika was stuck.

That meant she had to create an opening. She had to make her forget, like she had done to the man in the coffee shop.

Without any time to concentrate, Monika could only steal a few minutes' worth of memories from her — but that would be enough. A few minutes' worth of memories would be enough to disorient her, at least.

"Forget!" She turned her bound right arm towards Aki and shouted.

Snip.

Aki sliced the scissors through the air once more.

"Oh, so sorry... I saw that before, you see."

"Huh?" Monika stared in disbelief. All she could think was that she had cut "Distant Memories" itself.

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions right now, but we can finish that discussion in the coffee shop," the woman smiled. "These alleys are my hunting grounds, so I could finish you off easily enough right here, but the disposal can be such a pain. Inside, I can

break or spill whatever I want, without causing any trouble at all...” Aki laughed merrily.

Monika was slowly being dragged toward her by the invisible cord. She tried desperately to pull herself away, but she couldn’t. “I don’t understand! What’s going on here?”

“I thought, if I could see them, then naturally I could cut them. And if I could cut them, it was rational to imagine I could tie them, right? It’s so important to have common sense, you see...”

Monika grabbed onto an outdoor air conditioning unit affixed to the ground. Aki wasn’t especially strong, so she couldn’t pull her like this, but that didn’t actually solve the problem.

“You know that won’t do you any good, don’t you?” Aki walked closer.

Monika decided to use her last resort.

“Help me!” she screamed.

Monika’s scream echoed throughout the alleyways. But that was all.

The alleys were usually deserted anyway, and they were deep inside them... No matter how loudly she screamed here, it was certain that no one would hear her.

“Oh, I love it... the desperate screams of a brat who believed in her absolute superiority, and tried to hustle me into an uneven deal!” Aki shouted rapturously. “Still, it isn’t quite perfect... Not really my specialty. You’re not particularly happy, are you? You seem quite frazzled and miserable, in fact... which means that killing you will be no more than a minor diversion. Oh, and I’ve cleared everyone from the area, so no one will come save you. Scream as much as you like, all right?”

Aki continued talking as she slowly approached, perhaps hoping to fan the flames of her terror.

Aki could act this way because of her certainty that no help was coming. It was this leisurely overconfidence that would be Monika’s salvation.

As if Monika’s prayers had been answered, she heard a girl’s voice coming from around the corner. “Huh? I was sure this would take us all the way through...”

It was followed by a boy’s. “Yori, I told you there was no way we could get to the station area from here.”

“You think? But at least this way we can be all alone—”

A girl and boy, arm in arm, came around the corner. Above the

girl's head was the label "Yori," and above the boy's head was the label "Yu."

"Tsk!" The girl clicked her tongue as she laid eyes on the two of them.

"What's going on here?" the boy asked in surprise.

"Did you do something, dearie?" Aki asked, looking at Monika in suspicion. She must have been sure that no one would be here.

"'Save Me, My Prince.' It's my most powerful ability!" Monika told her. It twisted their surroundings as well as fate to make sure that someone would conveniently arrive to save her in time. It was a true last resort.

She'd heard it came with a high price, but Monika wasn't worried. Whatever happened would surely be better than dying.

"Hmm, well, the interruption is irrelevant... and she does look quite happy." Aki looked at the newly arriving girl and licked her lips, seeming to forget about Monika entirely. "Yes, yes... perhaps I'll smash up her boyfriend a little bit first. Yes, that sounds just wonderful!"

Aki laughed merrily, and Monika didn't want to know what she was thinking. But their reaction to hearing the God Killer's wicked intentions was contrary to what she would expect.

"See? She called you my boyfriend! I wonder if we really look like a couple!" Yori cried.

"I'm sure we don't," Yu responded.

The girl was smiling happily, while the boy seemed to be wincing.

Aki seemed to interpret their reactions as a simple inability to grasp the situation they were in. She disappeared.

The next instant, she was hanging in midair, the boy's foot planted smack in her jaw.

Monika had no idea what had just happened.

He'd shown no signs of preparation for the kick; the next thing she knew, his leg was over his head. It was like time-lapse photography.

Later, Monika would sort out events as such:

Aki had charged at the boy faster than the eye could see, just as she had done with Monika. She arrived in front of him at supernatural speed, then leaped to the side, kicked off the wall of a building, and thrust her scissors at him from midair. Then, the boy had counterattacked.

“Who’s this lady?” the boy asked in puzzlement as he watched Aki topple over, unconscious.

*****

Now that Yuichi had finally appeared in the story, Monika took a brief pause in the telling.

“Sakaki... even without Soul Reader, you still beat up a Serial Killer?” Aiko said with a sigh.

“Well, sure... but she attacked me out of nowhere,” Yuichi responded. “Was I not supposed to fight back?”

“I could barely believe my eyes, too,” Monika said. “I had no idea what had just happened. Yuichi, could you really see her move?”

“Look, there’s no way I’m not gonna see someone charging at me at full tilt...” he said.

“I couldn’t see it,” Monika cried. “There was no way you could!”

Yuichi shrugged. Since she was a woman, he’d held back just a bit, using just enough power to jostle her brainpan rather than breaking her jaw outright. He could only have done that if he’d been able to predict her every movement.

“But that can’t be the end of the story, right?” he said. “I remember coming there with Yori, kicking a strange woman out of the air, then carrying you away. But I don’t see how that leads to me ending up with Soul Reader.”

“It’s because Monika tried to do something underhanded, and she doesn’t want to say it outright,” the daifuku spoke up.

Monika glared at the interrupting daifuku. It had been chiming in here and there since the story started.

“I’ll tell, okay?” she said. “I’ll tell... just don’t get mad at me.”

“Did you do something that *would* get me mad?” he asked. “Fine, though. I won’t get mad about anything you say... I don’t think. I’ll try not to get mad, at least.”

“It’s okay, Monika,” Aiko assured her. “Sakaki’s not the kind of person to get really mad at a little girl.”

Monika seemed to take Aiko at her word, and continued the story grudgingly.

*****

The boy and girl ran up to the fallen Monika.

The boy crouched down and peered into her face, while the girl watched with slightly peevish expression.

"Are you okay?" the boy asked.

When Monika heard the boy's voice, her first thought was to run away. Even though he was the one who had saved her, she didn't want to bother explaining what was going on.

"Yeah, I'm just fine. Um, I ought to be going..." Monika stood up and was about to take her leave, when she suddenly staggered, dizzy on her feet. Her head was aching. At first she thought it was just the result of coming down from the adrenaline, but then she heard a voice.

Hey, are you trying to run off?

"Huh?" Monika looked at the boy and the girl. Neither showed any signs of having spoken; Aki was unconscious, too. She kept looking around, but nobody else was there.

Please don't speak aloud. They'll think you're crazy. I live inside you, so if you want to speak with me, do it in your mind.

The boy and the girl were looking at Monika in concern. They didn't seem to hear the voice. It was all completely in her own head.

Who...? What the heck are you? she asked in her mind, without speaking aloud.

It's hard to describe it exactly. I'm basically a side effect of your "Save Me, My Prince" power. Use of this ability requires paying a price, and I'm the one who makes sure that happens.

What do you mean, a price? she demanded.

Um, look... you really should have died back there. The power to twist fate like that isn't something that can be used without consequences. You're basically just putting off the problem into the future.

Huh? Monika asked.

Using her abilities typically made her tired, so she had thought that it would this time, too. She'd thought that was all it would be. Since it was a major ability, she'd thought it might knock her unconsciousness at most; she'd never thought she would have to offer up anything more than that.

So what kind of price am I supposed to pay?

Well, he saved your life, so you should give up something just as valuable, the voice told her. *Oh, and you'll pay it to him, since he*

saved you.

But what should that be, exactly? And how do I pay it? And if you yelling at me is the worst that'll happen, can't I just skip it?

The voice was certainly irritating, but nothing more. The moment she thought that, though, the headache grew worse. It was intense pain, like someone grabbing her brain in a vise. It soon grew bad enough that she could no longer stay on her feet.

You can ignore it if you want, but the headaches will grow worse. Eventually, your head will explode and you'll die, the voice said, mercilessly, as Monika fell to her knees.

"She doesn't look okay... She's gone really pale." The boy walked up beside her and spoke as he touched her. "The wound to her shoulder doesn't look that bad, but her ear's in bad shape. Yori, have you got anything?"

"I'm not our big sis, so I don't just happen to have a first-aid kit on me, no."

It hurts! It hurts! What should I do? I can't do anything at all like this, you know! The pain in her head was so intense that Monika couldn't even move. There was no way she could pay any price like this.

...Monika, really. What should you say when someone saves you? the voice prodded. *Use your common sense. You know what it is, right?*

"Oh, um, th-thank you for saving me..." Urged by the voice, Monika thanked the boy.

The pain subsided just a little. Apparently the thanks had sufficed as a part of the price.

"Did I really save you?" the boy asked. "I don't know what was going on, but... well, we'd better get you to a hospital, anyway. Can you stand?" The boy offered his hand.

While she was vacillating over whether or not to take it, the pain in Monika's head turned severe once again. *But I thanked him!*

A simple thank you isn't sufficient payment for saving your life. Try to offer him the biggest reward you can think of. Of course, if you don't have it on hand right now, the promise to pay it later is enough.

This was getting ridiculous. She cried at the boy as if to struggle against the splitting pain in her head. "Wait a minute! Let me... let me reward you!"

"Don't worry about that now," he said. "We need to get you to the hospital."

“I’m telling you to wait! I need to reward you, or else... or else my head will explode!” Monika begged him, her face pale.

She didn’t have time to think about anything else. Her head was actually starting to creak.

“Are you being serious?” The boy looked at her dubiously. It was only natural; most people would have their doubts when someone said their head was going to explode.

The boy seemed rather exasperated, but the girl was looking at Monika with calmer eyes. “Big Brother, I think she’s serious...”

“You can decide if you want to accept it later!” Monika cried. “Just let me offer it!”

“You look like you’re really in trouble... I don’t really get it, but okay. Say it.”

“My life savings.”

“That’s a big offer.”

“Three hundred sixty million yen.”

“That’s too much!”

It was the result of things she’d done on a whim since becoming an Outer. She’d realized that a girl with no family or friends would need a lot of money to live on, and while she felt like she might have overdone it, she now had a comfortable nest egg.

The boy didn’t seem like he was going to accept the offer, but just making it had relieved her headache. Apparently it was the gesture that mattered more than the result.

Your life savings? Nice one. But won’t offering all of it cause problems later? You could have at least kept enough to live on.

It’s okay. I have an idea. Monika could think now, at least, but the pain in her head hadn’t fully subsided. That meant she had to offer something else.

“Okay, I heard you out,” the boy said. “Are you okay now? And while I’m pretty sure you’re joking, I just want to make it clear that I’m not going to accept all that money from you, okay?”

“Okay. But I don’t think I’ve done enough, so can I offer one more thing?”

“Sure, if listening to it is all I have to do,” the boy replied, dumbfounded. He probably didn’t understand at all, but he seemed like a considerate enough person to indulge a little girl’s crazy story.

“Um... my body,” she said. “Despite how I look, I’m 15, so don’t worry about that. Then if you want to marry me after, I’ll be a good

wife to you for the rest of my life!"

"That's *way* too much for helping you out a little!" he shouted.

"Big Brother, would you mind going home without me?" the girl asked icily. There was something frightening about her eyes. But the pressure in Monika's head had completely vanished, signaling that she'd reached the necessary quota.

Ah-ha... If you get married, you won't need your savings, is that it? Well, I guess that does amount to offering something equivalent to your life. But now that you've made that promise, you'll have to keep it, you know?

The boy sighed. "I don't understand any of this, but are we done now? Can we go to the hospital?"

"Yeah. Ah, I feel better, so don't worry... I can walk for myself." Monika stood up under her own power.

She took the lead down the alleys, with the other two following.

Once they were out on the main thoroughfare, Monika turned her right hand to the two of them. "Now... I want you to forget everything that's happened."

It was "Distant Memories," the power to make them forget they'd ever met. This had been Monika's plan all along.

No matter how much she owed them, if she didn't have to pay it immediately, she could make them forget everything. If they forgot about the loan, it might as well not exist. Monika had no intention of giving him her entire fortune, or of marrying him. With the power she'd focused while they were walking through the back alleys, she could easily erase the memories of the few minutes they'd spent together.

The two then wandered off into the shopping district, as if they didn't know Monika at all and were completely unaware of what had happened.

"What are you doing?" At some point, the source of the voice had appeared on Monika's shoulder. It was round and white and looked like a daifuku with eyes and a mouth.

"How do you like that, huh?" Monika said gleefully. "I outmaneuvered you! The headache's not starting up again, which means I'm all good, right?"

"No... you're not good at all..."

Monika ran back to Aki and retrieved the Evil God's right eye that had fallen on the ground next to her unconscious form.

In Monika's mind, everything was settled. Of course, she'd come to regret it very soon...

*****

"What do you mean, marry you?!" Aiko shouted.

"Why are you mad, Noro?" Yuichi asked. "It's just childish nonsense..."

"I-I'm not mad. It's none of my business anyway." Aiko seemed to settle down immediately, though she was still a bit grudging about it.

"I could get angry about having my memory erased... but it didn't cause any huge problems, so I'm not gonna bother," said Yuichi. "Anyway, what does this have to do with Soul Reader?"

"Right." The daifuku spoke proudly, descending from Monika's shoulder to the center of the round table. "First off, let me explain that I'm the embodiment of Monika's prayer. In other words, I exist to manage Monika's payment for services rendered, and to make sure she adheres to her contract."

"So you're a little like a guarantor, or a manager?" Aiko asked, poking the daifuku mochi.

"Something like that. But when I think back on the story now, I must say... that was a nasty trick you played," the daifuku said, glancing at Monika. "You'd better not keep this up out of elementary school. You'll never become a proper adult."

"Shut up! Besides, I'm not actually *in* elementary school!"

"Wasn't your head going to explode if you resisted paying the price?" Yuichi asked. He remembered her saying that, but if it was true, then she should have died a long time ago.

"No way. She couldn't pay the price if I killed her, after all. That was just a threat," the daifuku proclaimed.

"Huh? Really? But my head really felt like it was gonna split in two!" Monika cried. She looked surprised; it must have been news to her, too.

"You offered your full savings and your body for life in exchange for his help," said the daifuku. "That was a fair deal. But then you took away Yuichi's memories, which upset the balance sheet. So I took it upon myself to confiscate an ability you considered indispensable, Soul Reader, and give it to Yuichi. Unlike your money and your body, that was something I could give on my

own authority. In other words, Soul Reader was the price for his memories."

"So I saved her life, and in exchange I got my memories stolen *and* a weird ability forced on me... I'm not really sure what I got out of this deal," said Yuichi. "Oh, now that I have my memories again, can I give back Soul Reader?"

"As I said before, while I can give Monika's powers to other people, I can't take them away from you."

Yuichi was dumbstruck by the arbitrariness of it all. "Okay, so. We only have one wish, and you're gonna use it to save your friend, right?"

"Well... um..." Monika stammered.

It was starting to sound like participating in the Divine Vessels War wasn't going to solve the Soul Reader problem.

"Fine," Yuichi said. "That's okay. You can save your friend. I'll manage somehow."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Having to see a few weird things is a small price to pay to save a human life."

"Thanks..." Monika said after a pause, in a rare show of graciousness.

"So, now I know how we got here," said Yuichi. "Let's talk about what we're going to do now. A resonance has started, and as Makina said, it doesn't rain, but it pours. In other words, it's gonna continue for a while. That means you need to give the Divine Vessels to me."

Monika had two Divine Vessels: the right and left eyes of the Evil God.

"Huh? But then you..."

Monika had left them with Yuichi at one time, but she seemed hesitant to let go of them now. Perhaps she was worried that if he had the Divine Vessels, it would throw his life into disarray, and that was why she had taken them and hidden in the oni settlement.

"I accepted your terms before because you seemed hesitant about handing them over, but I really think it's too dangerous for you to hold onto them," Yuichi said.

He'd been thinking this over since hearing the story and learning that Outers weren't necessarily invincible. Monika had been grazed during an incident over summer vacation, too, but in the situation she'd described, she had nearly died. He couldn't just

leave her with the Divine Vessels.

"Okay," Monika said. "But I can't put everything on you, Yuichi. We can each hold on to one." She handed what seemed to be a glass eye to him.

"But even if you only have one, they'll still come after you," Yuichi objected.

"I'm risking everything I have on this. I can't just leave it all to someone else. This is the best compromise I can do; splitting them up will reduce the chance of them coming after me, and it means that even if one's stolen, we still have a chance."

"Okay," said Yuichi. "It stinks that we can't detect the resonance... but at least we now have Dannoura getting in touch with us when it starts up."

Monika seemed determined, so Yuichi gave up on trying to persuade her any further.

*****

By the time Monika's long tale was wrapping up, Ryoma Takei's fight with the Evil God was nearing its end, too.

The park was in a wretched state. It was practically unrecognizable.

The ground had been scorched, with deep gouges taken out of it. In places, what had once been dirt or sand was now luminous glass. This phenomenon — the result of vitrification caused by high heat — was one sign of the fierce battle that had been raging here for some time.

The ground was also littered with machines. Lumps of metal-like substances, possibly parts of a vehicle, were scattered all around, billowing smoke and sparking from their broken ends. They were clearly beyond use.

There were people lying on the ground, too.

People in armor, people in robes, people in outfits that resembled spacesuits. Some had animal ears, tails, or wings (which called into question whether or not they were actually "people"), while others were revealed, via severed and broken limbs, to be at least partially mechanical.

All had either been summoned by Ryoma, or had joined him under their own power.

All had been defeated.

Ryoma himself had been battered and cut, and it took all his strength just to stay standing, propping himself on the sacred sword, the Ame-no-Ohabari.

Meanwhile, the young man who had called himself the Evil God remained unharmed, as did the boy who was his ally.

Ryoma dug deep inside him, then raised his sword up high. The Ame-no-Ohabari. It was the goddess Ame-no-Ohabari-no-Mikoto, incarnated as a sword.

Ryoma raised the sword high over his head, puffing out his chest. It was a stance that left him completely vulnerable, but he didn't care about that. The difference in ability had been made abundantly clear by now; there was no point in prioritizing defense.

"Let's go, Mikoto!" he called. "Give it all you've got!"

"I shall, Ryoma!" Ame-no-Ohabari-no-Mikoto responded. The sword's blade began to glow white.

"Graaaaah!" With an ear-splitting howl, Ryoma swung the sword forward.

He was about ten meters away from the target, but that was well within the sword's range.

The slash tore through the ground as it drew closer to the man, but he brushed it aside with one hand. The force of the deflection changed the swing's trajectory. It kept going, further distorting the terrain of the park, until it collided with the barrier wall in a fruitless explosion of power.

Ryoma's legs gave out. He slumped into a heap.

It was no exaggeration to say he had given it absolutely everything he had. Most of the power came from the sword itself, but the attack had also drained Ryoma's stamina greatly.

"Wow, I didn't think you'd be so much weaker than him..." The leisurely comment came from Ende, who walked up to stand beside Ryoma. Since she hadn't participated in the battle, she still sounded perfectly energetic.

"Hey, you... little help here?" Ryoma snapped. "You've just been reading books the whole damn time..."

"Sorry, but this is pretty much all I can do for you," said Ende. "I don't know any martial arts, so I can't fight directly."

"So... what am I supposed to do? I'm seriously out of options, here..."

He had called every ally he had. He'd used hougu, paopei, hihou, and artifacts. Not one of them had worked on the man.

“Eh, it should work out,” Ende said flippantly.

“How do you know?!” Ryoma shouted angrily.

“You pass.” Now it was the young man who sounded flippant. “No need to worry, by the way. They’re all still alive. The robot girls probably just need a little fixing, too. Well, the unmanned vehicles are probably beyond repair... I didn’t bother holding back with them.”

“What the heck?” Ryoma burst out.

“I’ll permit your participation in the Divine Vessel War. You still have a lot to learn, but I hope the battles to come will make you strong enough to keep you in the fight.”

The things the young man was saying suggested he hadn’t even been giving it everything he had. He wouldn’t have had the presence of mind to merely disable his opponents if he hadn’t been massively more powerful than them.

The walls of darkness covering the park suddenly collapsed. The sun was now hanging in midair, a little past its zenith, illuminating the park as if it had never been gone. The young man and his partner were nowhere to be seen.

“Past noon already, huh? I’ve totally missed school...” Ryoma muttered.

Saturday classes were morning only. There was no point in his going to school now.

“I thought you’d be wiped out, but you sound like you’re in pretty good shape,” Ende commented.

“Not as good as you. So, did you know he was going to let us go?”

“Well, when an enemy appears in the prologue who’s so powerful you don’t have a prayer of winning, they’ll usually come up with an excuse to let you go. Otherwise the story would be over before it even started.”

Ryoma was dumbfounded by the baselessness of her statement.

“But seriously, it only worked out that way because you’re a protagonist. If you’d just been some nobody, he’d have used you as a demonstration of his power or his cruelty or something.” As usual, Ende’s baffling explanations went in one ear and out the other for Ryoma.

After he’d calmed down a little bit, he couldn’t help but realize just how bad things were around him. The park was beyond salvation, so Ryoma decided to leave it as it was. But he couldn’t

just abandon his comrades.

The questions of where to take them and how to treat them were giving him a headache.

*****

It was around noon, just after Ryoma's battle had finished.

In the abandoned hospital, Natsuki and Alberta's eyes had been abruptly diverted to the new woman who had appeared. She was wearing the uniform of an employee of a large bank, and she held blood-stained scissors in one hand.

Her deportment was perhaps what was standard in her profession: light makeup and hair neatly tied at the back of her head. She seemed to be going for "prim," but she couldn't hide the erotic aura that seemed to pour off of her.

There was no one in the serial killer world — Natsuki included — who didn't know this woman's name.

Aki Takizawa.

She was known by the appellation "the happiness seeker," but her true nature couldn't be further from what that innocuous label implied.

There was a rumor that she hadn't been seen around town lately, but Natsuki would never have expected to see her turn up here.

"Aki, dear! We must not be on the same page somehow... why would you do that?" Alberta complained as she returned to her senses.

It was natural that she'd want to complain, but the wording itself was bizarre, given that Aki had cut off her right arm.

Natsuki watched both women carefully.

Alberta's focus was on Aki. She didn't seem like she'd attack Natsuki right away, but Natsuki's arm and leg were still immobilized thanks to Albert's curse.

Natsuki didn't know what was going on, but she wasn't about to assume that Aki was on her side. That didn't necessarily mean that she was on Alberta's side, though.

"Stay away from Aki, no matter what." That was what underworld denizens said to each other.

She was powerful, but that wasn't the root of the problem. A strong killer could still be useful to others.

The real problem, as they saw it, was her personality.

She was capricious. There was no way of knowing what might set off her temper. One minute you'd be talking, and then for some reason you could never understand, she'd fly into a rage.

Then, she might kill you on the spot, or she might not say a word, then come back to kill you years later, as if on a whim.

This made her impossible to deal with, and as a result, even in the underworld, she was kept at arm's length.

Natsuki knew all this, and so she kept quiet, watching.

The situation that she'd come from had been the worst possible scenario. Things couldn't actually get any worse, so there was a chance that whatever happened here might turn things in her favor.

"You know that our orders were to bring Natsuki back alive!" Alberta paused, and thought. "Wait, were you trying to stop me because you thought I was trying to kill her?"

"Sorry. I misunderstood," Aki said, as light as could be.

"I see. Well, misunderstandings happen." Alberta, seeming not to mind, went to pick up her severed right arm. The bleeding had stopped at some point.

Alberta pressed the severed arm against its stump, and incredibly, the fingertip of the hand moved. She formed a fist with it, then opened it. She flexed the elbow a few times, then rolled the shoulder to test the range of motion.

"Hmm? Natsuki dear, why the slack jaw? You must have known I could do this, right? Of course, I can't grow new ones..."

The incredible speed of her recovery was causing Natsuki to stare in disbelief. Just what kind of abilities had she received from *him*? What did he need with a monster this powerful?

"Hmm, actually... what did you come here to do, anyway, Aki? Surely you know that I can handle Natsuki by my—" Alberta was interrupted — this time, it was her left arm that went flying.

Aki, who had been standing close to Natsuki, was now in front of Alberta. Fresh blood trailed from the scissors in her right hand, and it was easy to see that she'd just used them, but Natsuki hadn't even seen the movement happen.

"I beg your pardon!" Alberta snapped. "Stop this right now, before I get angry!"

Even if she could restore her lost limbs, it surely wasn't without risk. At the least, she could probably feel the pain.

"Go ahead," Aki retorted, indifferently.

The entirely one-sided “fight” proceeded.

Natsuki couldn’t follow Aki’s movements at all, and it was likely that Alberta couldn’t, either.

She was dissecting Alberta.

Her head, her shoulders, her elbows, her waist, her ankles... human body parts, cleaved at the joints, lay scattered across the blood-stained floor.

“Has her curse lifted?” Aki, who had not been touched by a single drop of blood, addressed Natsuki.

The curse did seem to have lifted; Natsuki had regained control of her right arm and leg. But Natsuki couldn’t move right away. Not without knowing what Aki was here for.

As a denizen of the local underworld, she knew the common knowledge about Aki: her haunts, her active times, her appearance, age, name — all the necessary information to avoid her. But this was her first time actually meeting her.

Even if Aki knew about Natsuki, it was probably only what any of them knew about the neighborhood serial killers, and the two of them had no points of contact in common.

“Why...” Natsuki began.

Could Aki really have saved her? From what the rumors said, Natsuki couldn’t be sure if she could take this at face value or not.

“What’s wrong? Does it still hurt? The wounds don’t look bad... even you should be able to heal from them soon enough.” Aki walked up to her, crouched down, and examined Natsuki’s shoulder. She almost seemed worried about her.

“Why did you save me?” Even that innocuous question might be enough to upset the woman, but Natsuki had to ask it.

“Yuichi...” Aki said, then trailed off, blushing.

Natsuki was not sure how to react to hearing that name in this context.

“You’re friends with Yuichi, aren’t you? Don’t worry. Leave everything to me. I’ll help you. I’ll even kill *him* for you, if I have to.”

“Huh? But... what... what are you planning?” Natsuki burst out. Perhaps it was pointless to ask such a straightforward question, but again, she couldn’t help but ask it.

Aki had no reason to save Natsuki. To do so would be making *him* her enemy.

Which suggested she must have some ulterior motive for her

actions.

"Nothing," said the woman airily. "I just want to be of use to Yuichi, that's all... if you're his friend, and I help you, he'll surely praise me."

Natsuki couldn't figure out what Yuichi had to do with any of this. But right now, however precarious the situation may be, Aki was apparently on Natsuki's side.

Chapter 5: Oh, Yeah… There Were Monster Hunters, Weren't There?

It was the day after the conversation in Nihao the China.

Yuichi had come to one of his regular haunts, the sacred forest behind a local shrine. He'd been using this place for training a lot lately, and he treasured it; it was rare to find such a large area where so few people came.

He was concerned about the Divine Vessel War, but there was nothing he could do to get things rolling on his end, so he might as well just keep up his usual routine until the resonance started again.

It was December, so it was already extremely cold, but Yuichi was only wearing a light track suit.

He'd been plunged into extreme conditions by his sister many times before, and maybe thanks to that, he could deal with severe heat and cold. Japanese winters were nothing to him.

Today, Yuichi was by himself, without his sister's accompaniment.

At the start, she'd had to force him to train, but he'd taken to it well, and now he stuck with it of his own volition. He didn't necessarily do it every day; it depended on how he was feeling, mentally and physically. Mutsuko herself said that there was no point to training if you just did it out of habit.

He varied the contents of his practice based on how he felt that day, too. Right now he was striking a tree. He would hit the tree with the side of his arm, then add in some footwork, moving around the tree as he hit it high and low. Sometimes he threw in a kick.

Yuichi enjoyed this kind of thing.

At a glance, it might look like he was repeating the same things over and over, but each time he was adjusting his input and angle very slightly, searching for the most efficient moves and methods of unleashing his power.

He was better today than yesterday. He'd be better tomorrow than today. Yuichi gained real fulfillment from that tangible sense

of improvement.

Training is fun when I can do it at my own pace, anyway...

When he was with his sister, he had to keep on his toes, always uncertain of what she was going to throw at him next.

She'd pull some strings with some acquaintance of hers, and have him taken somewhere where he'd be ambushed by raging hoodlums, or soldiers dressed in near-futuristic equipment firing at him with shotguns while shouting at him in a language that definitely wasn't Japanese.

Just the other day, she'd forced him to fight a group of a thousand armed men. Technically, Yoriko had been the cause of that, but he had to wonder if his big sister had somehow planned it all along. She was a true believer in the importance of fighting real opponents, and she was constantly making him do just that.

"Fighting is the best training there is! There's no training that beats a real fight!" was her philosophy, apparently.

It was true that fighting a tree wouldn't teach you how to handle yourself in a real fight, but Yuichi still found it beneficial. It made his arms and legs stronger, for one thing, but it also taught him how to manage the recoil from his strikes. Whether you hit a human or an inanimate object, there was always recoil, and every school had its own philosophies about how to deal with that. Hitting anything required a complex series of interactions from numerous parts of your body, so even just fighting a tree could teach you a lot.

As Yuichi focused on his strikes, he could sense somebody approaching. He stopped.

Not many people knew that Yuichi trained here — nobody except his sisters and Natsuki Takeuchi, as far as he knew.

He turned around, wondering who it was, and he saw a girl approaching.

The label above her head read "Anthromorph (Cat)." It was Yuri Konishi.

She was Yuichi's classmate, who on the first day of class had proudly boasted of her personal wealth. In addition — not that he was eager to drag this up again — she had tried to kill him once before.

As she approached, Yuichi could see that she was wearing a fur-lined white coat, which even someone as fashion-ignorant as he was could tell was extremely expensive. His second thought — that if

anything got on that coat it would be extremely visible — was a sign of his middle-class mindset.

Yuri's golden hair, bound up in a complicated style, was not something any middle class person could imitate, suggesting she had her own personal stylist, and while the object she was holding in her hand looked like an ordinary basket, Yuichi had no doubt that it was a luxury item of some sort.

"Oh, it's you, Konishi..." Yuichi spoke up as she arrived in front of him.

"Is that any way to greet a person?"

"Oh, sorry," he said. "I just thought maybe it was Takeuchi..."

His sisters would still both be asleep, so Natsuki was the only other person he would have expected to see here. Although lately, for some reason, Natsuki had been acting distant. She wasn't even showing up for club meetings.

"So, how can I help you?" he prompted.

ANTHROMORPH (CAT)

“What kind of a question is that? Aren’t you the one who said you needed to get to know me better? Why have you been avoiding me?” Yuri scowled unhappily.

She had asked him out once before and he had turned her down. At the time, he had told her that he wouldn’t go out with her because he didn’t know her well, so Yuri had declared she’d try again after he got to know her.

“Part of it is that it’s awkward, but I was also never very social to start with,” Yuichi said.

“I’m well aware of that. I can see that you rarely interact with anyone outside of a small group in class. So I’ve decided to take initiative in coming to you in this place at this time of day, specifically!”

The fact that Soul Reader let Yuichi see things he didn’t want to see had led to him studiously avoiding interaction with others. He had never exactly been a social butterfly, but ever since entering high school, he had probably started coming off like a total misanthrope.

“I don’t mind you coming to visit, but did you even consider my own situation?” he asked. “I’m in the middle of training right now... but okay, fine. I’ll hear you out, at least.”

“Yuichi Sakaki... will your insolence towards me never cease?”

He wanted to resume training, but it would be hard for him to hear her out if he was moving. Instead, he spread his legs to shoulder width, then dropped his hips, thrust his fists in front of him, and lowered his elbows.

“What is that ridiculous posture?” she demanded.

“I told you, it’s training. Chinese martial arts. It’s called zhan zhuang. You’re basically sitting in an invisible chair. It’s good for strengthening legs and glutes.” In truth, it was more complicated than that. But to someone who wasn’t interested in martial arts, that explanation was probably good enough.

“I cannot believe I’m wasting my time with someone like this...”

“Seriously?” Yuichi furrowed his brow. It was Yuri who had proposed spending time together.

“How do you expect to eat breakfast in that position?” she demanded. Yuri showed the basket in her hand to Yuichi. It apparently contained breakfast.

“What, you brought food? I was planning to eat after I got home, but...”

Despite his grumbling, Yuichi broke his stance and returned to normal standing posture. If she’d gone to the trouble to bring food, it would be rude to refuse.

As he looked around for a place to sit, Yuri pressed the basket into his hands. “There’s a plastic sheet inside. Why don’t you lay it out for us?”

“You want me to do it?” Yuichi thought she should really be the one to do it, but he did as he was told, spreading out the sheet.

Once they were both sitting, she produced drinks and sandwiches from the basket.

The sandwiches were varied, with a lot of different things inside them. He took a bite of one sandwich, impressed by the amount of time she must have put into them.

It was good.

This one was a katsu sandwich, and the crispiness of the fried pork was definitely professional level, suggesting an expert’s hand had gone into making it.

“They say the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, after all,” Yuri said loftily.

“I wouldn’t say you’ve grabbed my heart, but it really is good. Is cooking a specialty of yours, Konishi?”

“Why are you asking about my cooking skill?”

“Huh? Didn’t you make these?”

“Of course not. I had my chef make them, naturally!”

“Which means it’s your chef I should be appreciating...”

Yuri’s attempts at earning his affection certainly seemed half-baked. Even if it had turned out badly, she really should have done the cooking for herself, Yuichi thought.

“So, is breakfast the only item on the agenda?” he asked.

“That was merely the icebreaker, naturally. As I told you before, my real objective is to let you get to know me.”

“Okay. Regardless of who made it, you still brought me good food, so I’ll hear you out, at least.”

“Good. My name is Yuri Konishi.” Yuri straightened up, giving an unnecessary introduction.

“That’s where you’re starting?” Yuichi asked in disbelief. “I know your freaking name!”

“My first name aside, what do you think of my last name? It

seems a rather mundane name for someone so wealthy, doesn't it?"

"I've never really thought about it..." He wasn't entirely sure what she was asking him. It certainly was a common enough surname, but he couldn't imagine how that was supposed to tie in with a person's income level.

"That's all right," she said. "I don't particularly care for it myself. My surname comes from my adoptive family. My real parents have another last name."

"Your adoptive family? Wait, you're adopted? Are you sure you want to tell me something so personal?"

"Yes. My goal is to have you know me better, after all."

This was all far from what he was expecting. She had been put up for adoption, or she had ended up adopted... Either way, it all sounded very complicated, and it left Yuichi at a loss for how to respond.

"My father's surname is Sumeragi," said Yuri. "The Sumeragi family ruled Japan in the past and in the present, and shall continue to do so in the future. The information about my mother is not public, but as you may surmise from my hair, she is most likely a foreigner."

"Um... is this a behind-the-scenes thing?"

Yuri had said they'd controlled Japan, but Yuichi had never heard the name before. The name suggested a connection to the emperor, but it was hard to believe Yuri could be related to the royal family.

"You may think of it that way if you like, but ever since ancient times, Japan has been ruled by anthromorphs," Yuri said grandly.

"This is a little hard to buy..."

"Anthromorphs have heightened combat abilities, so we used to lead commoners into battle. You can safely assume that all of the powerful clans throughout history, both noble and warrior, consisted mainly of anthromorphs. Even now, the leadership of the country's largest corporations still do."

It was at this point that Yuichi realized that she was really talking about the worldview to which she belonged. It was the story of a world he wasn't a part of, which he would never have known about if not for Soul Reader.

"At the moment, I am a nobody — merely one candidate to inherit the Sumeragi name."

Yuichi was getting a bad feeling about this. All this talk of heirs

and candidates smelled like a sort of trouble that he wanted no part of.

"Have you never wondered why a person of my stature should be attending a school as ordinary as Seishin High?" Yuri asked archly.

"I figured it was like Noro's situation; they wanted it to be a part of your education or something."

"The answer is simple," Yuri said. "It's because my adoptive father is an ordinary office drone. He doesn't have the money to send me to a private school."

"Uh? But you said you were rich, didn't you? Didn't you spend the first day bragging about your family's money?" Her story was completely opaque.

She had said it, and she had that air about her. She even had a chef. It was clear she had a lot of money, so he didn't know how to react to being told that she didn't.

"To be more precise, it's my real family that's rich," explained Yuri. "As long as I'm a potential heir, my care will be paid for, and I'm given an individual allowance and servants. However, my adoptive mother and father are not particularly wealthy, and it's the parents' job to pay for their child's school expenses. So no matter how much money I have, to pay for my own schooling would be overstepping my authority."

"That doesn't make a lot of sense to me..." Yuichi couldn't see how it mattered who paid, as long as they had the money, but perhaps she felt differently about it.

"I am but one of my father's one hundred children. Said children all come from different mothers, and have been adopted out to branch families."

"Hold it!" Yuichi finally put a stop to Yuri's lecture.

"What?"

"Look... I really don't need to hear about all this."

"Why not? You're the one who refused to date me because you didn't know me!"

"I meant more like... I don't know a lot about your personality, your hobbies, your interests. I'm not interested in your whole family background..." As a matter of fact, hearing about it made him extremely uncomfortable.

"But part of the reason I tried to kill Noro was because of the Sumeragi family inheri—"

Just as Yuri seemed about to embark on another litany of things he didn't want to hear, Yuichi heard someone scolding them from behind.

"You two! What are you doing here?"

He turned to see a girl with dark hair, dressed in a camel-colored duffel coat, looking at them angrily. "Monster Hunter" was the label above the girl's head. He felt like he'd seen it somewhere before.

"Um... who are you?" Yuichi asked with trepidation.

"I'm the daughter of the owner of this shrine you're trespassing on," she announced.

"Ah..." Yuichi froze up beneath the girl's glare. He'd never thought anyone would approach him about that, but now that she mentioned it, of course they would.

"What is all this? Didn't you have permission to train here?" Yuri asked, looking at him in confusion.

"Well, it is a shrine, and there's a fairly out-of-the-way forest behind it, so I thought anyone could enter without permission..." Yuichi averted his eyes awkwardly.

"It is true that we're a shrine, and the gate *is* wide open! But that's for pilgrims only! We can't just have people coming here for reasons other than the shrine's intended use!"

"It doesn't exactly qualify as trespassing, but I certainly can't approve of using the premises here without the owner's permission," Yuri agreed.

"Wait, are you criticizing me too, Konishi? I thought you were on my side!"

"Why should I defend a man I'm not even dating?" she demanded.

Yuri didn't seem to understand the concept of scoring points with someone.

"Anyway! I'd like to go somewhere we can discuss this more easily," the unfamiliar girl said.

It would have been possible for Yuichi to run away, but he knew he really was at fault, so he did as he was told and went along with her.

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Yuichi and Yuri were taken not to the shrine's main hall, but to

a standalone building a short distance away.

It was a two-story, four-bedroom house, likely where the head priest lived.

Yuichi and Yuri followed the girl to the front door. She opened it, stepped inside, and urged them to follow, but Yuichi remained rooted to the spot just outside the door.

“What are you looking at?” the girl demanded, perhaps thinking he was getting ready to make a break for it.

The girl was the daughter of the shrine’s head priest. Her name was Furu Shinomiya. She was beautiful, with long, striking black hair, but Yuichi’s attention was elsewhere at the moment.

“Hey, do you have a big family?” he questioned.

“It’s just me and my parents. Why do you ask?” Furu asked in confusion.

He was detecting some sort of strange presence here. There seemed to be more people inside than the building’s size might suggest. Despite that, though, it was very quiet. He could sense the presence of others, but there didn’t actually seem to be anyone there.

“Um, no reason.” It wasn’t good to dismiss one’s intuition, but he didn’t sense any particular danger at the moment, so Yuichi decided to pretend it was nothing. Besides, this wasn’t exactly a good time for him to start nitpicking the girl’s house.

Yuichi was brought to the living room and made to kneel on the carpet. This sort of thing was par for the course for Yuichi, but seeing Yuri take her own place next to Furu on the sofa stuck in his craw.

“Write your contact information here,” Furu ordered. “Your school, too, please. If things go very poorly, we may need to get in touch with them, too.”

Furu placed the paper and pen on the table in front of him. Yuichi obediently wrote down his personal information.

“‘Yuichi Sakaki,’” the girl read. “‘Age 16. Seishin High School 1-C’... isn’t that the class next to mine? To think that the culprit was so close...”

“Could you please not treat me as a criminal?”

“If it had just been a little picnic in our shrine forest, I’d look the other way. But there’s more to this, isn’t there? I’d bet you’re the one who’s been killing our trees. And given how many have died, you must have been at it for a while, right?”

She hadn't actually seen it happen, so it would be possible for him to lie. But he was hesitant to do that.

"Yes, that's right. I've been punching trees in that forest for a while now."

"Destruction of property. You really are a criminal." Yuri said, glaring down her nose at Yuichi.

"Seriously, whose side are you o—"

The girl's own glare cowed Yuichi into silence, which then reigned over the room for some time.

Yuichi squirmed under their gazes before at last taking another look at Furu.

I feel like I've met her before...

He was looking up at her now, but seeing her from front on had stirred some kind of memory.

"Where are you looking? Pervert! Criminal!"

"Oh, um, I just realized... there's something familiar about you..."

"Who recognizes someone by their chest? You really are a pervert!" Furu, who was wearing a sweater, folded her arms to cover her ample chest.

Yuichi knew that it was rude to stare at a girl's chest, but at the same time, he really did think it looked familiar. The monster hunters he'd met at the abandoned hospital before... One of them had been a woman dressed in a cloak and wearing a mask. Maybe it was too early to judge just from the Monster Hunter label and the similar body type, but they really were close.

"I'm starting to wonder if you really would an acceptable companion to me at all," Yuri piled on, looking at Yuichi disdainfully.

"Look, do you *actually* have a crush on me? Because it's really not sounding like it..."

"My body is forced to desire you, despite my mind's rebellion," she sniffed.

"That's a really, *really* horrible way to put it! You make it sound like I did something to you!"

"But you did do something to me. Something incredible," she informed him.

Anthromorphs had a tendency to be attracted to the strong, and Yuichi had destroyed the god they worshiped. It had, annoyingly, caused this anthromorph woman to develop an irresistible

attraction to him.

"Wh-What were you two doing out there?!" the girl cried.

"*Nothi*— um, nothing, miss." Yuichi restrained himself from arguing more fervently. He was the one being censured right now, after all.

"I wouldn't mind if we had, of course," Yuri said casually. "It is the middle of our mating season, after all."

"Konishi! Stop talking! You're just making things worse!" Yuichi shouted. He had at one time been curious about how anthromorphs reproduced, but at the moment, it was the furthest thing from his mind.

"Your immoral relationship aside, may I continue?" the girl asked.

"Yes, please do," Yuichi agreed gratefully.

"I'd been trying to investigate what was behind the rash of dead trees popping up in our forest of late. It took me a while to find you because I was convinced it was happening during the night. I never thought it could be happening after sunrise."

She was a monster hunter, so perhaps she'd thought it was the work of a yokai or some other supernatural creature. *Of course, there are plenty of yokai that operate during the day...* he thought.

"Now, would you mind telling me *why* you are destroying our trees?" the girl demanded.

"It's, um... martial arts training..." Yuichi muttered. He felt a little embarrassed now that he was saying it out loud.

"You did all that to those trees just with martial arts?"

"Sorry. Guess I got a little carried away..." He hadn't been just hitting them; he'd often been striking them with penetrating punches, which could cause their insides to burst without leaving a single external trace. A single tree never lasted for long, so after one tree died, he'd just move on to another.

"I can't believe this," the girl said coldly. "The forest around a shrine is that god's territory. Not only were you intruding on god's territory without permission, you were actively desecrating it! How do you intend to make amends for this?"

"Um, first, can I ask something I've been wondering?"

"What is it?" Furu's eyes narrowed, perhaps feeling like he had ignored her lecture.

"Is there really no one else from your family here? Like, no adults who usually come home at this time?" Though that was not,

precisely, Yuichi's actual question. The presence he had felt in the hallway earlier was starting to get stronger, and he was getting concerned.

"I am the only one at home at present," said Furu. "And that's lucky for you; my father would have called the police right away."

"I see. Then, I guess it must be—" As it appeared suddenly beside him, Yuichi struck it with a backfist.

"Bwugh!"

The being, which should have had no substance, went crashing into the living room wall.

Yuichi turned to see a girl dressed in a Seishin High School uniform lying in a heap on the floor.

Above her head was the label "Specter."

It was Chie Amatsu, a girl Yuichi knew well.

"Hey! Why'd you hit me like that? You almost killed me again!" Chie sat up, sulking as she held a hand to her cheek.

"Yeah? And what are you doing here?" Yuichi demanded. "I thought you were bound to the school!"

Chie's fellow spirit, Nami Eto, had been condemned to fall from the same place over and over again. Mutsuko had called her a bounded spirit — a ghost tied to the place of her death — and Yuichi had assumed Chie was the same way.

"Huh? Oh, see, since I almost managed to ascend, I can go wherever I want now."

"Yuichi Sakaki... who are you talking to?" Yuri looked at Yuichi, eyes full of pity.

"Oh, well, see..." Yuichi looked over at Furu, flustered. From the outside, it must have looked like he had had a seizure and then started muttering to himself, but he couldn't collect his thoughts enough to explain himself properly.

Furu's reaction, though, was contrary to Yuichi's expectations.

"How... how did you get inside my barrier?" she asked, looking at Chie in fear.

"Barrier? I don't remember a barrier... was that the tingly thing I felt on my way in here?" she asked.

"Why didn't I notice the presence of an evil spirit nearby?" Furu asked.

Yuichi didn't understand all the differences. But since Chie was a Specter, that might make her more powerful than an ordinary Spirit.

“I wasn’t just ‘nearby,’ honey,” said Chie. “Me and my friends have been playing around in this house for a while. I dunno if you’re supposed to be a miko, but if you are, I guess you’re not much of one.”

As if called by Chie’s words, more “Spirit”-labeled beings appeared in the room. They were dressed in a wide variety of school uniforms, but they all seemed close in age to Chie.

“Run! I’ll hold them off!” Furu said desperately, rocketing to her feet.

“Uh? Oh, I see. I get it... In that case... BWAHAHAHA! I WILL SLAUGHTER YOU ALL!”

The sky outside the window went dark and the whole house began to shake. Chie’s eyes turned into empty sockets crying tears of blood.

Furu’s face was stricken with despair. But as if to try to fight it anyway, her trembling lips began reciting a spell.

“I ask, with utmost humility and submission, that the great gods of purification — given form at the time of the great and wise Izanagi-no-Mikoto’s purification at Tsukushi-no-Himuka-no-Tachibana-no-Odo-no-Agihara — might purify and cleanse me of my failings, sins, and fi—”

“IS THAT SUPPOSED TO DO SOMETHING?” Chie asked, mockingly, as Furu’s chant seemed to fail to have any effect.

“Don’t get cocky!” Yuichi walked up to Chie, grabbed her face, and squeezed.

“Ow! Ow! That hurts! Cut it out! I’m sorry, okay?” Immediately, the shaking stopped, and the sunlight poured in through the windows once more.

Furu collapsed back down on the sofa, staring glassy-eyed at Chie and Yuichi.

Yuichi released Chie, who fell back onto the floor, cradling her face in her hands. “Ugh... Yuichi, you’re too rough. Is this domestic violence? Are you an abusive husband?”

“I don’t recall us ever getting married.”

“At the same time, it’s pretty cool... I can see why people get attracted to the really manly type.”

“Um, Sakaki, what on earth...” Furu seemed to be recovering some of her presence of mind, and with it, she was beginning to harbor some questions about what was going on.

“By the way, could I have some tea? I’m absolutely parched,”

Yuri threw in abruptly as Yuichi was racking his brain trying to think of how to explain the situation.

Yuichi said, “How can you be so calm in this situation? You’re kind of impressive, Konishi...”

Yuri didn’t seem the least bit perturbed by all of Furu and Yuichi’s rushing around and shouting. She had just been a tag-along to start with, and had spent the entire time acting like a disinterested spectator.

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As thanks for stopping Chie, perhaps, Yuichi was now allowed to sit on a sofa. He was given tea, as well, and all in all, his treatment seemed to have improved.

Furu and Yuri were sitting on the sofa across from him, while Chie and the other spirits floated above.

“There was nothing to do at the school, so I just wandered around the city until I found others like me,” said Chie. “They were all as bored as I was, so we decided to start having a little fun.”

“Yeah, we were totally bored!” another spirit agreed.

“Chie’s strong, too! Hanging out with her meant we didn’t have to fall in with those seedy-looking types, so we really owe her.”

The spirits were all high school girls. It was the height of annoyance.

“So why did you decide to come to a shrine?” Yuichi asked.

Chie said, “It was like a test of courage, I guess. But then it was, like, totally anticlimactic. All we had to do was restrain our power a little, and they didn’t notice us at all.”

Chie’s words seemed intended to get a rise out of Furu, but Furu just let out a groan in response. “Jiangui is supposed to be my specialty, too...”

It was hard to tell if it was because Chie was so powerful, or Furu was the opposite. It seemed anything he said would just make it worse, so Yuichi decided not to touch on the incident.

Jiangui was the ability to see ghosts — in other words, spiritual sight. “Gui” was written the same as the Japanese word “oni,” and the name came from China’s tendency to refer to the spirits of the dead in this way.

“Sakaki, has that specter possessed you?” Furu asked.

“I’d possess him if I could...” Chie grinned.

“No, but... do you remember that recent evil spirit invasion at our school?” Yuichi asked.

“Yes, I really thought it was a sign of the end... but the next thing I knew, it just stopped,” Furu said.

“I gained the ability to see spirits at that time, and I got to know her then, too. Well, I don’t think she’ll do anything too bad now...” Yuichi had decided to handwave a lot of the story away. Explaining it all would be annoying, and difficult, and could take a long time.

“Spirits? A likely story,” Yuri scoffed.

“You’re one to talk...” Yuichi was far more skeptical about the existence of anthromorphs than the existence of spirits. At least spirits could be put down to tricks of the eyes; the ability to instantly transform into a beast like her was far more unrealistic.

“If you can see them, I may want to ask for your help with something... but...” Furu cast a glance at Yuri, suggesting that she wanted to say something to Yuichi, but was hesitant about doing so in front of her.

“Oh, don’t mind me. I’m like this, you see?” Yuri said, putting her hands in front of her.

Her nails elongated. They had always been long, but here, they were actually visibly growing. At the same time, cat ears sprouted from her head. This was the form she had taken when she had attacked Yuichi during his summer vacation.

“Are you... an anthromorph?” Furu asked.

“Yes. And you’re a monster hunter, correct? We have a mutual noninterference pact with your organization. I won’t say anything about the spirits here, either.”

On their way here, Yuichi had told Yuri that Furu was a monster hunter. He’d thought it might cause trouble for them to be in the same room together, but apparently they were fine.

“Are you too, by chance?” Furu looked at him dubiously.

“I’m just a human who’s Konishi’s classmate,” Yuichi said. “I know she’s an anthromorph, but I’m not involved with them at all. So I’d appreciate it if you’d treat me as a novice to all this.”

Furu seemed about to explain some sort of supernatural situation, and Yuichi didn’t want her thinking of him as an expert. All Yuichi could do was see and touch spirits.

“Understood,” she said. “Well then, Sakaki. I’m going to make a proposition. If you cooperate, I’ll let this incident go without

complaint. I'll even let you continue training here as you have in the past. Of course, I'd ask you to stop destroying our trees..."

She was leaving Yuichi little choice in the matter, of course. He'd have to take part to get his crime smoothed over.

"Fine. I'd like to cooperate, but I can't agree until I know what the job is." No matter how bad a situation he was in, he couldn't just accept any proposal unconditionally.

"I'll lay it out very simply. Magical creatures have been running rampant in our city for a while now. A certain vampire is the cause."

"A vampire?" A number of faces rose up in Yuichi's mind; he knew quite a few vampires.

"Yes. If anthromorphs exist, it's natural that vampires would too, isn't it? The princess of the vampires has been in the city since summer. She's the root of it all."

The Vampire Princess, then. His list of candidates narrowed to Aiko.

"You're not gonna slay the vampire or anything, are you?" he asked. He'd be happy to cooperate to help make up for what he'd done, but if they were going after Aiko, he had to refuse.

"Certainly not," said Furu. "She's one of the more powerful beings in the magical realm. There's no way a few local peacekeeping monster hunters can stop her. And as your friend mentioned before, we have an agreement. We can't attack a vampire that hasn't done anything actively wrong."

That's true. Noro hasn't actually done anything wrong...

"But even if she's done nothing wrong, she's still calling magical beings to her. And some sort of tremendously evil being with great power arrived in the city a while back."

"'Some sort of evil being'... you mean you haven't seen it?" Yuichi asked.

"I haven't," said Furu. "But I sometimes experience revelations. As monster hunters go, I'm particularly sensitive to evil presences."

Despite that, it seemed she hadn't noticed Chie, who had been right next to her. Yuichi decided not to say that out loud, though, to avoid stirring up the hornet's nest. "Can your local peacekeeping monster hunters handle the situation?"

"We cannot. But we also cannot merely ignore it. That's why I was hoping to gather more information. I've been searching all around the town, but then I thought, 'It's always darkest around the

lighthouse,' and that's when I noticed our forest being ruined..." Furu cast him another cold glance.

"What will you do with the information once you get it?" Yuichi asked, trying to steer her off that subject.

"We monster hunters are like a franchise, with a central organization of sorts. We basically petition them, and they send someone who can deal with it. But we can't do that until we know more about what's going on. That's why we want to get your help in searching for information."

"I see. And you think I can help you with my spirit-sight?"

"I don't know."

Yuichi blinked. "Huh? So what's the point?"

"I think it's likely that the evil presence is repressing its aura. That's why I was hoping to use your jiangui. That perhaps you would be able to see something that I couldn't, or..." Furu seemed to be aware she was grasping at straws. If she was willing to ask Yuichi, a man she'd only just met, she must really be at the end of her rope.

"Well, even if you don't know anything, Yuichi might be able to do it right away, right?" Chie said.

Furu might not have much real faith in him, but like Chie had said, any faith Furu had in him wasn't actually misplaced. Yuichi had Soul Reader. In other words, if there was an evil presence out there, he stood a good chance of being able to identify it from its label.

And there's a chance it might be connected to the Outers and the Divine Vessels...

"I get it," he said. "I just have to look around, right? What's the search range?"

"I'm not sure. 'Within Seishin City' is about all I know, really," Furu admitted.

"That's pretty wide..."

Seishin City was a big place with both mountains and ocean nearby. Searching indiscriminately wouldn't get him anywhere. He needed some other form of direction. "Okay. I guess I'll start searching now, then. Let's see... I guess I should go somewhere with a lot of people, first."

Yuichi decided to head for the station area; it was the most populous location he could think of.

"Want me to search, too?" Chie asked.

“Sure, if you want,” he said. “You really should get out of here, anyway.”

“I know that,” she said. “It’s not as if there’s anything keeping us at this shrine anyway.”

“Covering the same ground won’t do us any good, so you should go searching somewhere else,” he told her.

There were probably places that would be easier for spirits to search in. Maybe she could be of use to him somehow that way.

Furu said with conviction, “I’m sorry it’s all so ambiguous... I just feel like some evil plot is unveiling itself in this city, and we have to stop it at any cost!”

Yuichi decided to head home and get changed before heading out again.

*****

Meanwhile, just after Yuichi had made it home, but before he set out to the station...

The evil presence that Furu had spoken of was sitting across from Hiromichi Rokuhara, elegantly sipping a cup of coffee.

They were in a cafe near the station area, sitting by the window. The cafe had a modern atmosphere and must have been quite popular, because nearly all the seats had been filled, despite the early hour.

“Now, shall I attempt to explain the situation?” the evil presence asked.

“I was starting to think you weren’t ever gonna,” Hiromichi responded, though his tone wasn’t critical. This young man had taught Hiromichi how to use his power, and Hiromichi had no intention of looking a gift horse in the mouth.

The man had appeared abruptly in front of him recently, and then, without any proper explanation, had taken him around the city and gotten him involved in various fights.

“I thought that showing you how things worked might be more efficient,” said the man. “If I’d launched into the explanation first thing, you wouldn’t have believed me, now would you?”

Hiromichi could see auras, and he knew that superhuman creatures existed, but it was true that that didn’t necessarily mean he’d believe every single thing he was told. There were still lots of things out there he had to see to believe.

“So, let’s start with the broad strokes.” The young man launched into an explanation about Evil Gods and Divine Vessels, but none of it really registered with Hiromichi.

“What does that have to do with me?” he asked finally.

“A great deal. You already have a Divine Vessel, the Evil God’s heart. That means you’re already involved in the war over the Divine Vessels.”

“The heart... is that where my power comes from?” Hiromichi asked.

“That’s right.”

Hiromichi’s power had awakened in him over spring vacation. He’d abruptly begun to see auras around people. He had been convinced that this signified the presence of evil beings, but apparently, it actually signified the effective range of Skill Eater. If he touched someone’s aura, he could steal their ability.

“Why do I have the heart?” Hiromichi asked. The man’s explanation suggested it had merged with his own heart, but he had no memory of acquiring the creepy thing.

“I don’t know, either,” the man said. “The Divine Vessel chooses its own host, though it appears some have ended up trying to twist that. Regardless, you acquired the heart and awakened its power.”

“Just who are you?” Hiromichi asked. “You seem to know a lot about all this.”

“Put simply, I am the Evil God in question.”

“I thought you couldn’t revive unless the Divine Vessels were collected.”

“That only refers to my main body. I myself am, you might say, a dependent. An optional part.”

A tremble went through Hiromichi. The man’s power was overwhelming. If this was only a sub-body, how much power must the “main” one have?

But another question rose up in his mind. “If you’re so strong, why don’t you collect the Divine Vessels yourself?”

“Good question. It would be simple enough just to collect them. I know where they all are, and I’m likely stronger than any of their hosts. but collecting them isn’t enough. The Evil God’s revival requires karma.”

Hiromichi stared at him. “What?”

“Put simply, it’s energy. Put a little less simply, it’s the power to

sway destiny. Think of it as something that builds up in response to dramatic developments. The war between the Divine Vessels creates drama, which builds up more of the energy I need. In other words, boringly one-sided battles won't do."

"So at the park yesterday, you were testing that guy to see if he could provide interesting enough battles?"

"You're a sharp one. That's correct. If he'd turned out to be boring, I'd have had to arrange to find someone else."

"In that's the criteria, I must be the worst person out there," Hiromichi said. "Why did you bother taking me around?"

He didn't know what sort of fights the man was after, but Hiromichi had a feeling he'd be unacceptable no matter what. He was fully convinced he was a boring person.

"Don't worry," the man said. "I don't need you to be able to have an interesting battle."

"What do you mean by that?" Hiromichi wasn't sure how to react to the declaration, which seemed to overturn everything else he'd been saying.

"Congratulations. You win."

"Huh?"

"The person who holds the heart wins the game. That's been decided from the very start. After all, the Evil God's soul is in the heart. In the end, all the Divine Vessels will find their way to you."

"But that means it's all just a farce..." Hiromichi said slowly. The man had said all that about the Evil God and the Divine Vessel War, when in fact, the winner was already set in stone. Hiromichi was completely dumbstruck by the news.

"Indeed, it's a farce. A fixed race. A put-up job. All of that."

"Does that mean I get a wish granted?" Hiromichi asked.

This was all very unexpected. He wasn't sure how much he could trust it, but whether he did or not wouldn't change things much. At the end of the day, he had no choice but to do what this man said.

"Yes," said the man. "But remember, you only get one, so you should start thinking it over now. That's about all I had to say. I think you should spend the rest of the day going around on your own."

"Huh? Wait a minute! I can't handle this by myself!"

"You'll be fine. As you said before, your power is like a cheat code. You can nullify the abilities of others, and steal them, too.

How could you possibly lose?"

"But..."

"You can also just sit tight until I come back, if you want," said the man. "But remember, you have a very special power. You'd do well to strengthen it as much as possible while you can." The man's demeanor was utterly laid-back, yet it left no room for argument. They would be parting ways here, and that was that.

"Fine, I'll do it," Hiromichi said. "But what are you going to do?"

"Remember two days ago, when we went to see the girl with the right arm? Do you remember the girl who was with her? The one who ran away?"

"Did that happen?" He couldn't remember. He was pretty sure that girl had been alone from the start... if there had been someone with her, it had only been for a moment.

"She's my servant," the man said. "I've been worried, since I haven't been able to get in touch with her lately. Then sadly, she ran away, so I sent some of my other servants to search for her."

This must have meant that one of the other servants had found her... not that Hiromichi cared about any of that.

"Well, whatever. By the way, what should I call you?" He wasn't sure how much they'd be seeing of each other, but it was inconvenient not to have a name to call the man by.

The man thought for a moment, then responded. "Good question... I've been called many names in the past, but for now, how about Nergal?"

Chapter 6: We Found the Evil God Without Searching. What Now?

Yuichi had gone home, gotten changed, and then headed for the shopping district near the station.

He'd been told there was some evil threat to the local peace blending in here in the city, but it was all pretty vague, and most people would have no idea of where to even start searching. Yuichi had Soul Reader, though, which seemed like it would increase his chances of finding whatever it was.

Still, it seems pretty unlikely that I will...

He didn't have any idea what it might look like. Did it even have a physical form? If so, would it be active during the day? Would it be the type of thing to go walking around in the city? He didn't know anything about it.

Even so, he couldn't refuse Furu's request. She had basically said it was Aiko's fault, and if it was, then Yuichi was the cause of that, too.

Aiko wasn't doing anything wrong. Maybe she'd had a special birthright, and maybe that was causing trouble for others now, but Yuichi was convinced she wasn't responsible for that. Therefore, he'd decided, even if Aiko didn't know anything about it, he had to relieve her burden as much as possible.

"'Evil' is a pretty vague descriptor, though! Kinda raises some philosophical questions, too!" Mutsuko was walking beside him, as revved up as ever.

After coming home, Yuichi had tried to sneak back out, but Mutsuko had caught him. Then, perhaps out of boredom, she had decided to tag along. Now that she was with him, he couldn't exactly just ignore her, so he'd ended up explaining the long and short of the situation.

"All that aside, Yuichi Sakaki..." Yuri Konishi said, walking on his other side. She had been with him since the shrine, and she was apparently planning to stick around. "Are you certain you should

have undertaken such a vague request? If you can't find them, won't you just wind up searching endlessly?"

"Obviously, I can't keep it up forever, but even if I can't find it, the evil will try to do something eventually, and we'll probably find it then," he said. It would be best if they could find it before then, obviously, but if they couldn't, he'd just have to deal with whatever happened.

Wait, when did I start assuming I'd be the one to deal with it?

Yuichi immediately chastised himself for his eagerness. If there were monster hunter specialists in this kind of thing, he should probably just leave it to them.

"So why are you coming along, Konishi?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I come along? I went all the way to that shrine to meet you, after all."

"It's not going to be all that interesting. We're mostly going to be standing around staring at people." Yuichi's plan was to set up camp somewhere and watch the people come and go. His hopes weren't high, but it was possible he could find something that way.

"People-watching, huh?" Mutsuko cried. "I know the best place for that!"

With that, Mutsuko dragged Yuichi along without giving him a chance to protest.

*****

The place they'd arrived at was a cafe with a modern atmosphere.

"I feel like we come here a lot... well, I guess we couldn't exactly have an all-day stakeout out in the cold, anyway..." Yuichi murmured. It was the same cafe the truck had crashed into during summer vacation, and the one he'd brought Kanako to during her research outing.

"If you sit next to the window, you can see all kinds of people pass by!" Mutsuko declared.

"That seat, huh?"

Mutsuko was pointing to the same seat Yuichi had been sitting in then, the exact same spot the truck had crashed into. It felt a little like a bad omen, but sitting by the window would also let him deal with attacks coming in from outside. In a way, it was a pretty safe place to be.

“It’s looking pretty packed, though,” Yuichi said. “Maybe we should look for another place instead of waiting—”

Peering in through the window of the cafe, Yuichi was suddenly struck dumb.

“*Evil God.*” A young man with that label over his head was sitting in the seat Mutsuko had recommended. He was smiling a placid smile and chatting with someone in the seat opposite him.

“Hey... an Evil God would be pretty evil, right?” Yuichi asked.

“Probably? It *is* right there in the name,” Yuri responded condescendingly.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought, too. Also, he’s sitting right there.” Yuichi pointed to the young man, feeling very slightly like he was being made a fool of.

“What should we do? Should we contact Shinomiya?” Yuri asked.

“We’ll have to tail him! Right now, we don’t know anything about who he is! Let’s follow him back to his hideout!” Mutsuko burst in.

“Um, I’m not sure finding something like that would help us at all...” Yuichi muttered.

The group moved to a place where they had a good view of the cafe’s entrance. Before long, the young man left the restaurant, followed by a boy who looked familiar.

“Isn’t that... the kid from your class, Sis? Rokuhara?” Yuichi asked. Above the guy’s head was the label “Host.”

“That’s definitely Rokuhara, yeah,” Mutsuko said. “He’s the one who attacked Noro, right?”

Hiromichi Rokuhara. With the label “Apprentice Monster Hunter,” he’d attacked the vampire Noro.

The test to become a monster hunter was to kill a monster all by yourself. He’d ended up failing, and he’d said he didn’t want to get involved anymore, but Yuichi had remained on his guard to see if he might still try something.

The guy and the man parted ways after leaving the cafe. Hiromichi went on by himself, while the young man remained near the entrance to the restaurant, thinking about something.

Yuichi already knew Hiromichi’s deal, so he decided there was no point in tailing him. He was watching to see which way the man might turn when suddenly, the man began to walk towards him.

“Hey. You think he’s found us out?” Yuichi asked.

“He’s looking right at us, so I imagine so,” Yuri said, completely calm. Perhaps that unflappability was a sign of her high-class upbringing.

It wasn’t as if they were hiding, and he didn’t know anything about them, so Yuichi had been convinced that as long as they pretended they were talking, that would be enough.

“What should we do?” he asked.

“Go somewhere else?” Mutsuko suggested. “If this leads to a fight, there could be a lot of casualties if we stay here.”

Yuichi remembered the incident over summer vacation. There had been quite a few casualties then, and he didn’t want to end up repeating the same mistake.

“Okay. I think that direction would be best, given where we are.”

Yuichi began to lead them into the same back alleys he’d taken during the incidents over spring and summer vacations. It was apparently the turf of serial killers, so most people never came anywhere near it.

Yuichi and the others proceeded deeper down the twisting back streets. After a while, he stopped, and told Mutsuko and Yuri to wait a little further in.

“Hey,” the young man addressed them casually.

He seemed perfectly friendly, with no signs of malice about him. It was hard to believe his label was really an “Evil God.” At a glance, he seemed to be a completely ordinary human. It would have been difficult to find him no matter how good your enemy-radar happened to be.

Yuichi was at a loss for how to respond. At the moment, the man hadn’t done anything to make himself his enemy.

As a result, silence fell over them.

For once, Mutsuko was able to read the mood, and she remained quiet, too.

As Yuichi was trying to think of what to say, suddenly, his phone rang. Judging by the ringtone, the call was probably from Chiharu.

“It’s ringing. Why don’t you answer it?” the man prompted.

Yuichi answered the phone.

“Yuichi Sakaki! The resonance has begun!” the voice on the other end said.

Yuichi gasped. “Do you know where?”

“Indeed I do, for I have become quite sensitive! The closest target would be close to Seishin Station’s north exit!”

“*I’m* near Seishin Station’s north exit...”

Yuichi looked at the man. It seemed likely that he was a Divine Vessel host, which would explain how he had found him so easily. He’d discovered him with the resonance and followed him right there.

“Not letting it possess you suggests a half-hearted approach,” said the man. “I’m not even sure whether to classify you as a participant or not...”

“Are you... a Divine Vessel host?” Yuichi asked uneasily.

“No.”

“Right, so you want to fi— wait, you’re not?!”

Yuichi was baffled. Who could the man be, knowing about the Divine Vessels without being a host?

“Well, I am connected to them,” said the man. “It means I always know where Divine Vessels are, whether or not there’s resonance. I detected one nearby, so I came to investigate, but now that I think about it, this is all rather strange. You seemed to be looking in on us before the resonance even started, and you didn’t go after Hiromichi, the one who does have a vessel. Does that mean you have other business with me?”

“I... I wouldn’t say that, exactly...” Yuichi stammered. He hadn’t expected this to happen, and as a result, he was finding it hard to find words.

“This is pathetic,” Yuri said in a scathing tone. “Stop mumbling and assert yourself.”

“But...” Yuichi didn’t know how to respond.

If the man had been clearly hostile, he’d be able to fight him, but what was he supposed to do about being pleasantly addressed? He couldn’t just call someone evil and pick a fight with them when they weren’t actually doing anything wrong.

“Aw, darn!” Mutsuko cried. “He’s really got you stuck, huh? Hey, could you do us a favor and say or do something evil?”

They didn’t have any particular business with this man right now. Even if the man was evil, they couldn’t really condemn him when he wasn’t doing anything.

“Something evil, eh?” the man said. “I’m not sure that I can... You don’t have a Divine Vessel in you, so I see no reason to test you... and if you have no business with me, I should probably be on

my way."

As the man turned to go, Yuichi opened his mouth to call him back.

If he didn't want to fight, he thought, maybe he could tell him something useful about the war. But he wouldn't get the chance as he was interrupted by the sound of a gunshot.

The young man dodged the attack effortlessly.

"How violent," the man said. "You know it's not polite to surprise people like that."

The man was looking at a girl who had the label "Hero" over her head. Her right hand, holding a gun, was wreathed in black flame.

Yuichi recognized her. It was the girl he'd met in these same back alleys during summer vacation. She'd appeared during his battle with the "Immortal" giant, been killed, then disappeared. As a result, he hadn't learned much about her except that a Divine Vessel had found a host in her right arm.

In other words, she was a participant in the war. She was their enemy.

"Where's Natsuki? What did you do to Natsuki?!" the girl shouted.

"Natsuki, eh?" the man asked. "I have an idea of where she went off to. I was just thinking about going to see her."

HERO

The “Hero” girl fired her gun a few more times. The man dodged each shot effortlessly, but he seemed rather indignant about it.

“Could you please restrict your fights to other Divine Vessel hosts? Fighting me won’t get you anywhere.”

Concerned about stray fire, Yuichi moved Mutsuko and Yuri to the wall, then watched things develop, wide-eyed.

Why had the girl ignored Yuichi, who had a Divine Vessel, in order to fight the young man who didn’t? That was what he didn’t understand.

The man seemed content to remain on the defensive, so it must have been true that he had no intention of fighting.

With an air of frustration, the man leaped into the air. He kicked off the wall of a nearby building, then off the wall opposite it. He repeated the process until it carried him to the roof in a flash.

“See you around. You’re both Divine Vessel holders, so why don’t you stay there and settle things?” With that, the man disappeared.

They were now alone with the Hero, so Yuichi decided to talk to her. “You’re Maruyama from the next class over, right?”

Her name was Yurika Maruyama. He’d investigated a few things about her after the incident over summer vacation, but he hadn’t learned much beyond that.

“Sakaki! Have you seen Natsuki?” Yurika burst out as she ran up to him, looking distressed. It looked like she really didn’t intend to fight him.

“Takeuchi? What about her?” Yuichi asked.

“She saw him and ran, and I’ve been searching for her! I saw her and she was injured but then I lost them! They were running from something together, I think!” She seemed to be so flustered, it was hard to understand what she was saying. He wasn’t sure of the connection between them, but it did sound like Natsuki was involved in some kind of trouble.

“How hurt was she? What happened?”

“Hey! Will you persist in ignoring me?” a voice from the phone shouted. “I can hear through the phone that there’s some sort of fight going on, and I’m feeling very left out at the moment!”

Yuichi suddenly realized he’d forgotten to hang up the phone.

“Oh, sorry. We’ve just got a lot to deal with, you know?”

“True as that may be, it appears quite a few have gathered there. Are you well?” Chiharu spoke about the same time as *it* arrived.

Someone had just dropped down from the sky.

“No, we’re not well at all,” said Yuichi.

The resonance could tell hosts where other hosts were. Some used this as a chance to be cautious, but apparently this person was using it as an opportunity.

It was a boy about Monika’s age. He was wearing a small black cap, a white kimono, and a brocade stole, the outfit of a mountain monk. On top of that, he also had black wings like a crow’s sprouting from his back, and wore high-platformed geta sandals. He certainly seemed superhuman.

“It’s a tengu, right? A tengu did it, right?” Mutsuko asked excitedly.

“I think you just wanted to say that line,” said Yuichi. “He hasn’t done anything except land in front of us.”

If he was here, that certainly suggested he was a Divine Vessel host. He was clearly raring to fight.

“I don’t have time for this! I’ve gotta go!” Yurika ignored the tengu and broke into a run.

The tengu didn’t pursue Yurika, but remained right where it was, looking down its nose at Yuichi.

The tengu seemed to want to fight him.

Yuichi steeled himself for the fight. He needed to pursue Yurika to find out more about what was going on with Natsuki, and right now, the tengu was in the way. Which meant he’d just have to get him out of the way.

The tengu was standing at the center of a crossroads, about five meters away from Yuichi.

“I’ll start with you. I am—”

The tengu boy was probably about to introduce himself, but he didn’t get to finish. Instead, he just went flying to the side at great speed.

A man dressed in black vestments was standing where the boy had been. He looked like a priest. His hips were lowered and he held a fist thrust to one side.

“For heaven’s sake... one thing after another. It’s just impossible to follow,” Yuri said, agape.

Yuichi felt the same way.

Not a moment after the tengu had appeared, the priest had punched him out. It was hard to keep up with these rapid-fire developments.

"That's chongchui! It's Bajiquan!" Mutsuko shouted delightedly.

Bajiquan was known from manga and games, but there weren't many people who were willing to put the training in to learn it. It couldn't really be used in street fights, for one thing, so you didn't see it very often.

"Why would a priest know Chinese kung fu?" Yuichi wondered. There was nothing wrong with it, of course, but it didn't seem to fit, somehow.

"What are you saying? Bajiquan is a priest's best friend! Everybody knows that!"

"I don't think *anybody* knows that..."

While they were talking, the priest approached the tengu boy and took his Divine Vessel. It looked like a bat's wing. The priest put it in his pocket.

Even with the Divine Vessel stolen, the boy's crow-like wings remained, suggesting that they belonged to him.

"I don't suppose you intend to give me your Evil God part, do you?" the priest asked calmly.

"No. Also, get out of my way."

"If your intent is to pursue Yurimaru, I shall not permit it."

Yurimaru? It took him a moment to realize that he was referring to Yurika Maruyama.

"You're with Maruyama?" Yuichi asked.

"How troublesome... there was an Evil God part right in front of her, yet she's preoccupied with something else. Therefore, I shall have to retrieve it in her stead."

The priest had a placid demeanor, but he seemed to have nerves of steel. A fight was looking inevitable.

"Hey! Wouldn't it be funny if another enemy appeared and punched him out right now?" Mutsuko asked.

"Shut up! We've had too much of that twist already!" Yuichi snapped.

It was a troubling situation, but Mutsuko was acting as airheaded as ever.

"Bwahaha! I was just thinking the same thing!" a voice called from the phone.

Yuichi, suddenly realizing Chiharu had been listening in to the entire conversation, hung up the cell phone and put it in his pocket.

Suddenly, the priest's fist was in front of his eyes.

He had caught Yuichi completely flat-footed.

It was chongchui, a Bajiquan move that consisted of nothing more than a mid-level punch aimed at the throat. But the fist was already too close for him to dodge.

Yuichi drove the blow off course by directing the priest's hand down with his left arm. At the same time, he tried to counter with a right jab, but he then realized the first strike had only been groundwork.

Yuichi forced his furukami to activate.

He expelled a breath of explosive power and kicked off the ground, propelling himself backwards while protecting his heart with his right hand.

A shockwave.

Yuichi was blown back with force greater than that which he'd applied. He just barely managed to block the priest's right elbow.

It was true that he'd left an opening. But he'd also thought he was far enough away to work things out. That distance, though, had been closed in an instant.

The priest's movements were strange, seeming to ignore gravity and inertia.

He dropped his hips low and struck out with his right elbow from horse stance.

Yuichi was blown back to where the girls were standing, and landed. He had probably been thrown back about five meters in all. The man's power was unbelievable.

Yuichi steadied his breathing. No damage had been done. The shockwave, which he hadn't been able to offset entirely, even with his backwards jump, he now dispersed with the release of internal power in his chest.

"What in the world just happened?!" Yuri shouted. To her, it had probably looked like Yuichi had just suddenly jumped back.

"I *think* he tried to block a Bajiquan menghu yi pashan with a Bajiquan jianglong, but he failed and had to run away?" Mutsuko replied. While didn't she seem to be able to parse the instantaneous exchange of blows either, she did have an exceptional memory. Even if she couldn't parse it in the moment, she'd be able to replay the exchange in slow motion in her mind.

“Oh? You are quite formidable. To be able to block my magically-enhanced strike...” The priest looked genuinely surprised; he must not have expected him to be able to block it.

“Are you a Hero, too?” Yuichi asked. “There was something weird about the way you moved just now...”

Yuichi was taking new stock of his opponent. This guy was some kind of monster; he’d have to fight him like one.

“I am no Hero,” said the man confidently. “I am merely a member of a Hero’s party. I am a Mage.”

“You look more like a Monk in that outfit!” Yuichi shouted. But the moves he’d pulled off would make sense if they had been enhanced through magic.

As if reevaluating Yuichi as a strong opponent, the priest adjusted his stance. He spread his legs in front of and behind him and dropped his hips. His weight was shifted slightly behind him, to his right leg. His upper body was facing forward and tilted slightly.

His left arm was bent slightly in front of his face. His right arm was positioned to protect his solar plexus. His palm was turned towards Yuichi. It was a traditional defensive martial arts stance, protecting one’s core.

“Is it Wei Su style?” Mutsuko wondered aloud. “Wu Tan Bajiquan, then? But it seems pretty upright... and he said he uses magic, so... oh, I’ve heard of this! This is Magical Bajiquan!”

“What in the world is that?” Yuri couldn’t help but inquire about the odd-sounding phrase.

“It’s Bajiquan that incorporates magic! You use magic to enhance less-than-perfect Bajiquan moves! Look, that stance he’s using isn’t the proper style; it’s totally improvised! By the way, I don’t think people know a lot about Bajiquan stances, but each branch has its own recognizable stance. Wu Tan uses Wei Su, or crouching posture. Northwest Ma style uses Qi Gu Shi, flag and drum posture, for its Tongbei Fanzi. Changchun style uses Shaoma Bu, pony posture. But what do you think about the Magical Bajiquan name? What about Jiangmo, or demon-conquering Bajiquan? That sounds cool! Yeah! Let’s use that!”

Ignoring Mutsuko as she babbled on and on about his opponent’s style, Yuichi began walking towards the priest. He already had furukami activated. It seemed a bit excessive to use against a human, but he had abandoned any intention of treating this priest like a human right now.

“Listen, you’d better win with Bajiquan!” Mutsuko called. “If you lose to that lukewarm Bajiquan, I’m apprenticing you to Nihao the China!”

“Don’t treat Nihao the China like punishment!” Yuichi found himself on the verge of losing his enthusiasm, but re-steeled himself and started walking.

He struck no particular stance.

He was just walking with his hands hanging naturally by his side: li shen zhong zheng, a centered upright stance. Without favoring back, front, or either side, he just walked straight forward.

The moment he was within range, the priest moved. With a powerful zhen jiao propelling him off the ground, he thrust his right fist straight at Yuichi’s face.

It was a superhuman motion, a kung fu strike with more than enough training behind it. On top of that, it was enhanced with magic.

It was likely that nobody could see the back-and-forth that ensued. Even the combatants involved were not relying on their vision, but only on ting jin — listening energy.

The battle was over in the blink of an eye.

Yuichi had stepped in and struck out with his right elbow, which had then made contact with the priest’s chest. The priest had collapsed.

Just looking at the result, it had seemed like an easy win.

But in that instant, a complicated back-and-forth had ensued that the eye could not catch.

“Exactly what just happened there?” Yuri asked, confused.

Probably the only people who understood what had happened in that instant were the two people who had fought.

“Looks like the priest went from tan ma zhang to menghu yi pashan!” Mutsuko cried. “This is the version of menghu yi pashan that the famous Li Shuwan pioneered! Yuichi fought back with ba wang dingmen and ba wang kinke, in that order!”

Yuichi had blocked the priest’s right punch with his left forearm, deflecting it, while forming his right hand into a blade and stabbing it at the priest’s face.

The priest, in a similar way, had blocked that strike with his left forearm, but Yuichi had applied downward pressure to that in an instant. And through that point of contact, he had upset the priest’s center of balance. The priest’s movements had stopped for an

instant, and in that brief opening, Yuichi had lashed out with three attacks almost simultaneously.

Pushing off with a zhen jiao with his right foot, he'd brought his left leg down on the priest's skull. His right hand, still in contact with the priest's arm, had slid over to crush the priest's fingertips and pull. Then he'd raised his left elbow up to hit the priest in the solar plexus.

Normally, this would have been the end of it. No one could react after having multiple parts of their body hit simultaneously. They'd be confused and unable to defend.

But the priest had abandoned his left hand and leg to respond only to the attack on his solar plexus.

Using a projection of energy from his chest, the priest had propelled Yuichi's left elbow back.

It would normally have been a powerful enough counter to take out the attacker, but Yuichi's attack hadn't been finished. He had dropped his hips low to assume a horse stance, then slid his right elbow along the priest's left arm to strike it into his heart.

"It's also called chain elbow because it's multiple strikes with the elbow!" Mutsuko declared. "Naturally, the thing to watch is the familiar chuangbu stepping style often seen in Bajiquan. Drop your hips low, pivot on the ball of the fore-leg's big toe, slide the heel forward, and open the legs wide. In other words, you spin while in a horse stance! But as a single move, it's called nian yao qie kua!" Mutsuko sounded very smug.

"Incidentally, I did have a question," Yuri asked, curiosity in her voice. "You called the move that Yuichi Sakaki blocked at first a menghu yi pashan, and you called the latest move by that name, as well. But weren't they both different?"

"Oh, Konishi, you know menghu yi pashan?" Mutsuko asked.

"Despite the way I look, I have quite a taste for video games. I believe that in fighting games, the menghu yi pashan is a palm strike." Yuri performed the move, mimicking what she'd seen in a game.

"Menghu yi pashan can change quite a lot depending on the school," Mutsuko explained. "But since the name of the move comes from the way in which it mimics a wild tiger climbing a mountain, I believe the clawing motion is the most important part. Like you're pushing aside the enemy attacks. But there are lots of ways to end it, with a palm or an elbow or all kinds of things!"

“Stop waxing poetic about the moves and get out of here!” Yuichi shouted. He’d realized that if he let her keep going, it would never end.

“But what about the... ‘Divine Vessel’?” Yuri asked hesitantly.

“Leave it! Let the guy who wants it take it!” Yuichi shot back. If any new enemies tried to come, maybe they’d go after the priest instead. It was only a possibility, but he had to bank on it.

*****

Yuichi’s team moved in a hurry, but they didn’t know where they were actually going.

They tried going in the direction Yurika had, but she hadn’t left any footprints, which made it hard to follow her path any further.

“So, what’s the situation? Is the resonance still going on?” Yuichi asked. So many things had happened while they were standing there, it was hard to get an immediate grasp on the situation.

“Let’s see... I think we should find out about Takeuchi first,” said Mutsuko. “She’s been acting strangely lately. She didn’t even come to school on Friday, did she?”

Apparently at some point she’d ended up with something chasing her, and then she’d gotten injured.

“But how do we look for her?” Yuichi asked. He’d only just learned that about Natsuki, and had no other clues.

“Ha! Allow me show you what I can do! You’ll be in my debt now, Yuichi Sakaki!” With that, Yuri suddenly disappeared. Her clothing fell on the ground. Then there was a rustling, and a golden-haired cat emerged from beneath it.

“Huh, you can transform into that, too?” Yuichi wondered what this meant for the law of conservation of mass, but this was no time to worry about that. He had been forced to accept that such things just existed in this world at this point.

“My sense of smell is very sensitive in this form! Not as good as a dog anthromorph’s, but many hundreds of thousands of times more sensitive than a human’s!”

“Little exaggeration, isn’t it?” he asked. “But that aside, what are we going to do? Go after Maruyama?”

“No, we’ll go back in the direction she came from. We’ll find the place where she saw Takeuchi injured, and trace Takeuchi from

that site."

"Sounds good. Let's go!"

Yuri the cat bounded off. Yuichi and Mutsuko ran after her.

*****

Natsuki and Aki had fled underground. They'd climbed down a manhole, through the sewers, and then even deeper. The two women had walked through the subterranean passageways that had been a fixture of the Seishin City underground for a very long time.

The stone passageways weren't full of wastewater, so it was better than traveling the sewers. Still, the walls were slimy and crawling with strange-looking bugs, so the place could hardly be called sanitary.

The walls were faintly luminescent in places, so while the area was very dim, there was just enough light to keep moving.

Natsuki remembered what had happened on Kurokami Island during her summer vacation. It wasn't exactly like the spaceship, but the atmosphere was similar.

The reason they were coming this far was to throw off the lingering pursuers. The lifeless servants Alberta had left on the surface were still wandering around. They were moving in ways such that normal people wouldn't realize they were there, but as time went on, things would get more suspicious. They couldn't follow orders forever, so apparently they were reaching their limits.

Desperate as they were, if they found Natsuki, they'd probably do whatever it took to bring her in on the spot. She didn't want to think about what might happen to the innocent bystanders if that happened.

Things had quieted down once they'd gotten underground, but Natsuki was still dragging her feet. She had been wounded from their encounters with these enemies. She felt especially pathetic because Aki was uninjured.

"Is it true you don't kill anymore, Natsuki?" Aki asked.

"Yes. That's why I'm like this..." Natsuki silently chastised herself for how much weaker she had gotten.

"Hmm, but does that really matter?" Aki asked. "I haven't killed anyone since this spring, either."

"But you killed someone just now."

"Oh, killing serial killers doesn't count. I'm sure Yuichi will

forgive me for killing someone like her."

"You... Miss Takizawa. What's your connection to Yuichi?" Natsuki demanded.

As far as Natsuki knew, she was the only serial killer Yuichi was involved with. She hadn't heard anything about him meeting any other serial killers since they had met, and if he had known one before he'd met Natsuki, he wouldn't have been so shocked by her existence.

"Aki. Call me Aki."

"Aki, then. So?"

"I tried to kill him, but he took me out instead," Aki said. "It was such a surprise. I didn't realize there was someone so strong out there. And I'm positive he was taking it easy on me."

It sounded like she really had fought Yuichi, then... and Yuichi had won.

Which means he was taking it easy on me, too...

She remembered the time she had fought Yuichi. She had thought that had been a close fight, but maybe he hadn't had to take her seriously at all.

"After that, suddenly, everything seemed so silly," Aki said. "Is this what they call love at first sight? My heart was racing like it never had before. I've never felt this way..."

It didn't sound like love, exactly. She had just interpreted her confusion at losing as love.

"The power to turn defeated enemies into allies..." Natsuki muttered.

"What?"

"Many people Sakaki has defeated in the past have ended up becoming his allies in the end. Myself included."

"I see. Does he have that many?"

There seemed to be an extra nuance behind Aki's words, and Natsuki wondered if she may have chosen her words poorly. Aki hadn't done anything especially strange so far, but even among the crazy breed that was serial killers, she was seen as the most dangerous of all. She seemed to have affection for Yuichi, and it was entirely feasible that she might see other women who cared for him as enemies.

"What? Why are you afraid? Do you think I'll do something to Yuichi's other allies?" Aki was very observant, and apparently skilled at reading the emotions of others. Perhaps this came from

her experience in seeking out happy people and killing them. “Don’t worry. I won’t do anything like that. I think you might have the wrong idea about me.”

“No, of course I don’t...” Natsuki couldn’t possibly be honest. But Aki probably saw right through her anyway.

“I won’t do anything that will make Yuichi hate me,” Aki said, as if it were obvious. “After all, I want him to like me. Doesn’t that go without saying?”

Aki was confusing Natsuki in how dissimilar she was to what she had imagined. The truth was, this entire time, she had been nothing but friendly to Natsuki. There was no sign of the capricious and violent serial killer the rumors had spoken of.

“I thought that when you liked someone, you’d act like a complete yandere,” said Natsuki. “Tying them up and trying to keep them for yourself...”

“I don’t know much about it, but when I’ve heard the word ‘yandere’ in the past, I’ve never understood it,” said Aki. “A yandere is a person who only cares about themselves, right? They don’t care about the other person at all. It’s hard to believe that their behavior stems from genuine affection.”

The two continued walking randomly through the corridors. At the crossroads, they chose the path from which they felt the fewest life signs. It was partly because some unknowable things also nested in these underground paths. They apparently didn’t aggressively seek out intruders, but it was best to avoid running into them if one could help it.

“This path leads somewhere, right?” Natsuki asked.

“Probably. It’s my first time here, too. But it’s better than being on the surface, right?”

“I know it’s late to ask, but why did you save me?” Natsuki asked. If Aki’s own statement about her motives was to be believed, it was so that Yuichi would like her. But she’d had no reason to go out of her way to save Natsuki.

“I received the order from *him* to capture you,” said Aki. “I don’t have any servants like the others, and when I went to the last place you had been, I found Yuichi there. I thought, ‘This must be fate!’”

Those who received power from *him* and became his servants often received divine revelations from him, of guiding principles and orders. The transmission was one-way, so there was no need to

follow them, but those who believed in him blindly would follow his orders to the letter.

"Because I'd realized that you and Yuichi were friends, I thought, 'I have to save her.'"

"Couldn't you have talked to Sakaki about it?" Natsuki asked. "It would have been your chance to cooperate with him."

"But... I just felt so shy..." Aki looked away, her cheeks turning pink.

Her reaction seemed inappropriate to be coming from an adult woman, but Natsuki chose not to say that out loud. She didn't want to provoke her unnecessarily. She hadn't fully grasped what Aki would find acceptable yet.

"Why didn't you follow his orders?" Natsuki asked. "If you're his servant, I thought you would have gladly done so."

"I don't care about *him*. He offered me power, so I took it. He doesn't mind if I live whatever way I want, so I do."

"That's strange," Natsuki said. "Why did he come after me, then?"

If they were free to do what they wanted, he could have just left Natsuki alone. Yet he had sent pursuers after her and tried to capture her alive.

"I don't know." Aki shrugged. "It might be connected to the fact that you've become almost human again. I'm envious of you in that regard..."

Her malice swelled for a moment, then dispersed. As long as her violent emotions remained, there was probably no way Aki could ever return to normal.

At the moment, Natsuki had nearly entirely lost her urges to kill. In that regard, there was a clear difference between her and Aki.

"I think that as long as I don't kill anyone, Yuichi might accept me." Aki sounded truly innocent and optimistic. "After all, you've managed to be normal friends with him since you reformed."

They continued walking onward.

They continued down the identical-seeming underground hallways, and just when Natsuki was starting to get nervous, they came out into an open space.

It was a dome-shaped hall, likely about 50 meters in diameter. At the center was what looked like a stone altar, and braziers burned brightly around it.

“Hey.” There was a man standing on the altar.

Natsuki and Aki immediately tried to turn back, but found that it was impossible. The path backwards was now blocked by a grate.

“You can’t run away after coming this far,” the man said.

It was the man she had met on her way to school. The man Natsuki wanted to avoid more than anyone.

“How...” she began.

“How did I find you? The underground is my territory. You picked the wrong place to escape to.”

Natsuki looked at Aki. She wondered if she’d tricked her here. But Aki was surprised to see him, too. She must not have known he would be here.

“If you’re asking how I came here... there are ruins like this all over the world, and I occasionally use them,” the man said. “This altar was used to venerate me, after all, so I know all the ways in and out.”

“What are you doing?! Why are you following me?” Natsuki demanded.

“I try to remain hands-off with my followers. I think you should be free to do whatever you want. So I don’t usually keep tabs on who’s doing what, and where. But that’s only as long as you don’t forget your duty. I can’t have you out there *not* killing people. There aren’t as many people in your line of work as there used to be, you know.”

He was the god of murderers — the god of death, war, and plague. All he had given to humanity was disaster. All he wanted was death. And so, he was venerated by serial killers.

“If you want a servant, find someone else!” Natsuki said hotly.

“Once something is decided, it’s foolish to try to change it so simply. Though if you died, that would likely force my hand...” The man jumped down from the altar. “But it is mysterious. Why are you so determined to reject me?”

The young man began walking towards Natsuki. His godly aura could now be felt clearly, perhaps because he had no need to suppress it anymore.

Just feeling it had caused Natsuki’s body to lock up.

She felt nauseous.

She was assaulted by an urge to want to confess everything.

“It appears that Jack the Ripper, who I placed inside you, has grown very weak,” the man said. “Probably because of the rumors

of his identity coming to light... Jack the Ripper's strength comes from being unknown, and even if the rumors are false, having that identity being on the news is a problem in itself."

Just his approach, step after step, was utterly terrifying to her. At some point, her body had begun to tremble. She couldn't stop herself. It was as if her body was not her own.

"So I'll prepare you a new one, and then you'll be fine. You'll be *dying* to kill people again."

Intentionally, perhaps, the man's advance was slow. Natsuki could do nothing but scream. She couldn't do anything else at this point.

"It saddens me to see you so frightened of me... or are you remembering something?"

She *was* remembering.

But all she could remember was fear. Her body was remembering how helpless it had always been against him.

The man continued his approach. He was still far away, but Natsuki's fear had reached its limit.

That was when Aki sprang forward.

Natsuki could only watch and cower, but Aki, it seemed, could still move.

But what good would it do?

He batted Aki back easily. He had only brushed her with his hand as she charged, yet that alone was enough to break Aki's body so badly that she couldn't even move. The arm she had used to guard was broken. Her ribs were crushed, and she'd hit the floor quite a distance away.

Natsuki's own will was breaking. Part of her wanted to run; part of her wanted to fight back; part of her wanted to kill herself. As a result, she couldn't move. All she could do was stand where she was.

It was probably already over. Natsuki had effectively died once already when she'd become a serial killer. Her memories from before then were hazy. She couldn't remember much from that time. Which meant that her current memories and personality were equally transient; they would be destroyed and remade anew. She would be reborn as a more powerful, more merciless serial killer.

She couldn't accept that.

She might not be the best person as she was, but she was still doing her best. She had begun to think that maybe she could live a

normal life. But she was losing her will to resist.

It had ended the moment she had met *it* here. The fact that she'd managed to escape the first time had been sheer dumb luck.

At the end of the day, an ordinary life was asking too much. Her current self would be gone, and she would be reborn again as a serial killer. It was inevitable now. There was no way to escape.

Her legs wobbled. She found herself unable to stand. She was losing all of her senses. She couldn't even tell where she was anymore. She could feel tears streaming pitifully from her eyes, but soon, even that feeling went numb.

Her vision narrowed; sounds disappeared.

Everything seemed to have gone far away.

"Takeuchi!"

But a voice that Natsuki should not have been able to hear had reached her.

"Move out of the way!"

The voice snapped Natsuki to consciousness. Following the instructions, she moved to the side.

An ear-splitting sound rang out. The grate bent, then went flying off its hinges with a bang. It flew past Natsuki, scattering rubble at her feet.

Natsuki turned around.

Yuichi Sakaki was standing there.

Chapter 7: Looks Like Punching Will Solve This After All

Yuichi and the others had followed the feline Yuri into the depths of the underground tunnels.

There they had found a room locked in by a grate, with three people inside. They were Natsuki, the “Serial God Killer” he’d kicked to the curb over spring vacation, and the “Evil God” man he’d met before.

The moment Yuichi saw what was going on inside, he decided he had to destroy the grate.

“Takeuchi! Move out of the way!” he shouted.

He could tell Natsuki was in a trance-like state. But even so, she moved.

Furukami! In an instant, he unleashed the power that let him exceed human limits. He thrust out with his palm and struck the grate with all his power. Unable to withstand his power, the grate bent and went flying.

Yuichi slipped inside.

He ran to Natsuki and lifted her up. Natsuki was limp in Yuichi’s arms, having gone past her limit.

Yuichi had gone in to save Natsuki on instinct, but he didn’t actually know what was going on.

He looked around.

He was standing in a wide, dome-shaped space with an altar at the center surrounded by braziers. The walls were covered in murals with what looked like letters carved in them. The Serial God Killer was slumped on the floor a little ways away. Her arm was broken, her chest caved in. She still seemed to be alive, but she might not last long without treatment.

And then, there was “Evil God.”

He was standing in front of Yuichi, several meters away, staring at him in confusion. He really did look like a perfectly nice person. It was hard to believe he was an evil god.

“I met you people before, didn’t I?” the evil god asked. “Did you follow me here?”

“Of course not,” Yuichi shot back. “We just came here to save Takeuchi.”

“Do you know each other? That’s right, I was surprised to hear Natsuki was attending a normal school…”

Yuichi looked at Natsuki. She was crying like a child, clinging to Yuichi and trembling.

“You… what did you do to her?” he snarled.

“I’m sorry, did I owe you an explanation?” the man asked nonchalantly.

“You said you were an evil god or something, right? Is this part of your war?”

“Well, since you are a participant, I will answer you there: No, this has nothing to do with the war. Is that enough for you? I just happened to meet a little runaway child while I was in the city, and I wanted to bring her back.”

“Are you guys family or something?” Yuichi demanded. If he was, that wouldn’t make it right, but it would make things more complicated. There were some issues only family could understand.

“You could think of it that way. Incidentally, the girl fallen over there is related in the same way, so you don’t have to worry about her.”

“Like hell I don’t!” Yuichi shouted. “She might be bad, but if she’s dying, then I’m gonna take her to the hospital!”

Yuichi was getting annoyed by the man’s laissez faire way of speaking. It was like he saw through everyone and looked down his nose at everything.

“I doubt that will be enough to kill her, personally,” the man said calmly. “I did hold back, after all. That aside, what is it that you want? As far as I know, you just barged into my territory and started complaining at me for no reason.”

“I’m taking Takeuchi and that woman and I’m going home. You can stay here and do whatever you want.”

“No, I can’t have that,” the man said coolly. “I need Natsuki. Though that woman there… Aki Takizawa, I think? You can take her with you.”

“I didn’t ask for your opinion,” Yuichi snarled. “I’m going to do it, even if I have to do it by force.”

“Hmm, this really is trouble. I’d rather not kill you here, but if

you persist, you're going to leave me no choice."

"Is that a threat?"

"More like a prediction, I suppose? I'm indifferent on the matter, myself." It looked like there was room for discussion, but the evil god's manner was different than it had been back in the alley; he seemed ready to fight if it came to it.

He was strong; Yuichi felt that in his skin. Some people might subconsciously read this as malice, but to Yuichi, it was nothing so vague.

The man's tone, expression, bearing, posture, gaze, breath, pulse... he evaluated them all, calmly, and his mind's resultant judgment was that this man was prepared to kill him.

He wasn't about to declare defeat before he even fought, but he did know that he couldn't compete while he was protecting Mutsuko and the others.

What should I do? Yuichi wondered.

If he'd been by himself, he'd be fine. He could either put his all into the fight, or he could run away. But in his current situation, that wouldn't be possible.

If he fought, the others around him might get wrapped up in it. It might not be possible to take them all and run, either.

"I guess there's no way we can talk this out, huh?" Yuichi asked, despite knowing it was probably a futile attempt from the start.

He knew it was just an image in his mind, but despite this man being labeled "Evil God," he seemed strangely reasonable. They might be able to negotiate something.

"I doubt it," the man shrugged. "I have no intention of letting Natsuki go for now, while you want to take Natsuki with you. I can't see any room for compromise, can you?"

He made it sound impossible, but he was at least open to the attempt. Maybe talking could get through to him after all.

"Hey, you said 'for now.' Does that mean you'll let her go later?" Mutsuko interrupted.

"I've already told you a lot, so there's no point in refusing you now... That's right. I'm going to conduct a little ritual, and when that's done, I'll be happy to free her. But once I do, I'm not sure if she'll go back to you."

"What do you mean by that?" Yuichi shot back. There was something about the way he said that that didn't seem up-and-up.

“I wonder if you know that the serial killer archetype attached to Natsuki right now is Jack the Ripper. It seems he’s grown quite weak recently, so I was thinking of swapping him out for another. It’s a way of bolstering her flagging killer instinct. If I do this, of course, there’s a chance her current personality might not survive it.”

Yuichi paused. “Are you the one who made Takeuchi a serial killer?” He felt a wave of rage surge up inside of him. If Natsuki’s urge to kill had been given to her by the evil god, that meant she was being forced to kill against her will. Yuichi couldn’t allow that to pass.

“Hmm? I think you might be under some misunderstanding... she always wanted to kill people. I didn’t force that on her. It’s easy to talk about killing people, you see, but it’s harder than you’d think to actually do it. People aren’t made to kill other people. There’s a high psychological hurdle they need to clear. So the people I choose as servants must have the basic potential to surpass that hurdle.”

“What are you trying to accomplish?!” Yuichi yelled.

“Murder, of course.”

Yuichi was struck dumb by his totally straightforward answer.

“Well, I *am* a god of death,” the man said. “Not accidents and suicides, of course... I’m a god of killing. All kinds of killing, from intimate murders to wide-spread wars. Plagues and viruses also fall under my domain.”

“A god of death? Like Hades or Thanatos?” Mutsuko asked cheerily despite the tension hanging over the room.

“Hmm, I’m not directly connected to myths like that. I call myself Nergal, actually.”

“From Babylonian myth! But don’t you have a sun god version, too?”

“Listen, I get a lot of mythology freaks coming to me with these questions, so let me tell you in advance that the myths have nothing to do with anything.”

“If you are a god of death, what are you trying to do? Create serial killers and send them around to kill people?”

“My endgame is the extinction of humanity,” the man said. “But that’s hard to accomplish all in one fell swoop, so I’m generally forced to resort to pettier measures. I would much prefer an enormous pandemic — that or a nuclear war — but that’s too much

for me to handle alone. I'm limited in my scope until my main body reawakens."

"Then why don't you just go around killing people yourself, without skulking around in the shadows with serial killers?" Yuichi demanded.

"I can't afford to stand out. If I do, it will trigger the appearance of powerful allies of good. So the most efficient way to do things is to chip away little by little. Grassroots action, you know?"

The extinction of humanity. Pandemics. Nuclear war. The words he was throwing around seemed so outside the scope of reality that Yuichi's mind could barely find footing.

"Yes," the man said. "Incidentally, you don't have any Divine Vessels hosted inside you, but since you are a participant in the war, I suppose I can tell you this... If you gather them all, you'll have a wish granted, but I'm going to destroy all of humanity."

"Huh?" Yuichi asked, startled.

"Well, what were you expecting? You'll be reviving an evil god who craves the slaughter of all humanity. The minute I'm awakened, I'm going to spring right into action."

"That makes no sense! You make it sound like you're the god itself!"

"I'm its incarnation. In Hinduism, they'd call me an avatar. My real body was split into many parts and sealed, and I go here and there working my schemes in its place. The war is one of those schemes."

"By the way, did you know the term 'avatar' to describe your character in a video game refers to the same thing?!" Mutsuko asked excitedly.

"Nobody cares!" Yuichi shouted.

"Now... I've indulged you a little while, but what now? I've got a lot of time on my hands, but that doesn't mean I can just hang around here forever..." the man said.

"We're taking Takeuchi back," Yuichi said again, hardening his resolve. "No matter what it takes."

Yuichi handed Natsuki to Mutsuko.

"Don't worry about us, Yu! We can handle ourselves!" his big sister informed him.

He decided to trust her on that. He couldn't completely put the others out of his mind, but he also couldn't afford to divert too much attention to them.

He was worried about the serial god killer woman, too, collapsed there on the ground as she was... but he had to put her lower down on his list of priorities.

"I can see you're really raring to go... so I'm sorry to tell you this, but it's not going to be much of a match," said the evil god casually. "The power gap between a god and a human not making use of a Divine Vessel's power is a little too wide, I think."

"So what?" Yuichi glared at Nergal. He knew his opponent was strong, but that was no reason he couldn't fight him.

"Hmm, you've got me in a bind," Nergal said. "I'm not fond of picking on the weak, you see... Oh, I know. Why don't we play a game? If you win, I'll let you go. I'll allow for you to leave this place unharmed, and for Natsuki to remain as she is. I'll even throw in a promise to never come after her again."

"How very generous of you," Yuichi snapped. "Fine, whatever. Name the game."

Yuichi was happy to get out of the fight, but he'd be in trouble if the rules were something he couldn't handle.

"Let's see... we'll make it simple. If you touch me, you win."

"That's it?" Yuichi was stunned, for a moment, by how simple it was. But then he quickly reconsidered. It was *too* simple; there had to be some trick behind it.

"The boundaries of the game will be limited to this altar, as high as five meters in a dome shape," Nergal said. "And just so that it doesn't go on forever, let's set the time limit at ten minutes. If you lose, I kill you all. How does that sound?"

"Sounds great." It didn't sound too different from an actual fight, Yuichi thought. He had never been so naive as to think that he could lose and still escape with his life anyway.

"Still, even then, you probably won't stand a chance, so I'll throw in a handicap," said Nergal. "I won't use either of my hands. How does that sound?"

Nergal folded his arms, suggesting that he wasn't going to use those, either. Of course, that also meant he intended to attack somehow.

"Do whatever you want," Yuichi said.

"Let's start the game now, then."

With that, Yuichi slowly began to walk towards the evil god.

*****

The fact was, Nergal didn't think the boy stood any chance against him.

When he was serious about moving, he could move faster than the human eye. He could just run around within the boundary for ten minutes and he would win. The boy seemed to be anticipating some kind of loophole in the rules, but he didn't need to resort to such pettiness; his own physical capabilities would hand him the win easily.

At his core, Nergal was a god who enjoyed playing with humans. If he'd just wanted to keep Natsuki with him, he could have just killed them all. The reason he'd gone out of his way to talk to them, and even to offer up the game, was simply to toy with them.

It was a fun way to kill time, watching a silly human try desperately to concoct a plan, and then eventually, die in despair.

No matter how gentle and reasonable he may seem, after all, Nergal was still an evil god's avatar. Evil was in his nature. He was naturally inclined towards seeking out displays of great hopelessness.

He had never had any intention of releasing Natsuki, either. He had made that very generous promise only because he knew he'd have no need to fulfill it.

The boy was walking towards him now.

Nergal found him rather precious; the way he was trying to smother his anger just brought a smile to his face.

Nergal had no martial arts training — he needed none, with speed and strength like his — but even he could tell that the boy's carriage was that of a master. His center of balance was rock solid, and he carried himself with great stability. He had almost no openings, likely believing he could react to an attack from any angle.

No matter how excellent his techniques, though, there were limits to human reaction times. He would be helpless in the face of speed that exceeded that. Nergal could move faster than the speed of sound, and think and perceive things at the same speed. No human could ever hope to challenge him, no matter how well-trained they may be.

That was why his claim that he wouldn't use his hands wasn't actually a handicap. He could still hit the boy with the lightest of kicks, and deal crushing damage with that alone.

However, he had no intention of ending things that quickly. He had no intention of attacking, or even of running around. Nergal would stand right where he was and dodge until the time limit ran out.

The boy had walked up to Nergal, and now stood before him. His posture was a natural one, his hands hanging at his sides.

Nergal watched him expectantly, interested in how he might begin.

His vision went white.

For a moment, he wasn't sure what had happened.

He was looking at the dome's ceiling, which, he realized a moment later, meant that his face was turned upwards.

He looked forward again, quickly, and saw that the boy was standing there, an arm raised in front of his face. His fingers were outstretched, the back of his hand visible, the elbow slightly bent.

Something slick touched Nergal's lip. As it dripped onto the floor, he realized it was blood, and then he realized he was in pain.

There was an ache in the center of his face. He was bleeding, slowly, from his nostrils.

What did he do to me? Nergal thought, stunned.

The boy's posture suggested he had just finished an attack.

"I touched you, so I win, right?" the boy said dryly.

*****

Yuichi had been afraid Nergal might run away. But perhaps he'd been overconfident, or he'd underestimated Yuichi, because he hadn't even tried to move. Even when he was standing right in front of him, Nergal had just stood where he was, smiling.

Yuichi had decided, then, to just hit him... and the hit had landed like it was nothing.

Martial arts were full of moves that could be used for a swift first strike. Faster, stronger, more precise... every martial art prioritized the need to get in the first hit.

Yuichi had chosen the fastest attack he knew, a strike from the Tongbeiquan style. Using his arm like a whip, he had snapped his wrist and struck the opponent with the back of the hand.

Nergal hadn't reacted; he'd just stood there and taken it.

All he'd had to do was touch him, and that was all the strike had done. Normally, it would have been the beginning of a series of

strikes, but Yuichi had stopped it with one. Assuming Nergal kept his promise, that was all he needed.

"I touched you, so I win, right?" he asked the god, who seemed to be staring into space, uncertain of what had just happened.

Of course, if he revoked his promise, then that was that; he'd have to fight. But at this range, Yuichi had a feeling he could win.

"Uh?" Nergal didn't seem to understand what had just happened.

"Ah! He's trying to play dumb! I bet he made that promise because he underestimated you, and now he's realizing he can't back out!" Mutsuko cried.

Nergal wiped his nose, then looked at the blood on his hand. He seemed dumbfounded.

"I won, right? You won't interfere with Takeuchi again, and we get to go free, right?" Yuichi said.

"Oh, man! Don't tell me!" Mutsuko broke in. "You don't think the great, awesome deity, this god who boasted about making *all* of humanity extinct, is gonna back out of a *promise*, do you? That's so funny, I almost want to hear you say it! Go on, try to unring the bell! Be all like 'Oh, did we have an agreement? I dunno what you're talking about!'"

"Hey, Sis... please don't taunt him... you might make it harder for him to back off..."

"Huh?! Come on, you don't really think he'll just do it, do you? It was just lip service! This Mr. Big Boss Man who was all 'I know everything, I'm behind it all, I'm the mastermind' would *never* just *let* us go, right?!"

"What did I just say?!" Yuichi yelled.

"You win. I'll keep my promise," Nergal said at last, strangling out the words. Perhaps he was seething with anger deep down, but if so, he hid it well.

"You said you would stay away from Takeuchi," Yuichi reminded him. "That you would let us leave this place safely. You agree to all of that?"

"Yes, I agree to it. A god cannot break a promise, after all." Nergal seemed to have recovered his calm, as there was no frustration in his words at all. "But could you indulge my curiosity? I pride myself on being able to see and dodge attacks that come at me even at the speed of sound. How, then, did you do it? What exactly did you do to me?!" He was clearly trying to act calm, but

his incredulity was filtering out into his words.

"It was Tongbeiquan, but I probably could have hit you with anything," said Yuichi. "Attacks are all about timing. I've fought my share of superhuman monsters, and it's led me to realize one thing... no matter what the monster, they're no different from humans. That goes for you, too."

"Me? Human?" Nergal looked openly surprised; he'd apparently never expected to be referred to that way.

"How to put it... You don't exceed the realm of what humans can imagine, I guess," said Yuichi. "You have human thought processes and human reactions. That's why martial arts logic works on you. You have the same blind spots in perception that humans do. Does that make sense?"

In other words, speed didn't really matter. It was all about timing.

People thought of consciousness as a continuous thing, but it wasn't, really. It wasn't analog, but digital, full of gaps — blank spots in a person's attention, instants when they weren't aware of anything.

He only had to sense that timing and strike. Then, if he moved in that split-second, it would seem like he'd disappeared.

It was easy to say, but less easy to accomplish. Most people couldn't identify the blind spots in a person's consciousness.

There were techniques in classic martial arts, however, that made it possible, and Yuichi had used an extension of "listening energy" for this purpose.

"Okay! Which way did you come in? If you want to get us out safely, you should tell us the way out!" Mutsuko declared.

Nergal still seemed a bit dumbstruck by Yuichi's explanation, but he did as he was asked and told them how to get back to the surface. It was through the entrance opposite the one they had come in from.

"Okay, let's go home, then!" Mutsuko declared.

"Sounds good to me, but I sorta forgot what we were out here to accomplish in the first place..." Yuichi said.

They'd come out into town to find the great evil presence; they had run into it right away, and then the resonance had started; the hero Yurika had appeared and told them about the danger Natsuki was in; a tengu had appeared; Yurika had run off; a priest had arrived and beat the tengu; Yuichi had beat the priest; then Yuri

had turned into a cat and helped them to trace Natsuki's scent.

"So our objectives were finding the 'great evil' and Takeuchi," Yuichi summarized. "I guess we managed to do that."

They had pretty much ignored the war, but it still felt, to him, like they had done enough for one day.

Yuichi cast a glance at Mutsuko. Natsuki seemed to have recovered her presence of mind enough to stand on her own two feet now, so Yuichi approached the fallen woman instead. She was still alive, but one arm was broken, as were her ribs. It didn't look good.

Yuichi pulled the woman onto his back. He wasn't sure how trustworthy the evil god was, but all he could do, for now, was believe that he would keep his promise and stay away from her, and them.

Nergal remained right where he was.

Yuichi headed for the exit, and Mutsuko and Natsuki followed. Yuri was at his feet, in cat form.

"Sakaki... am I really free from him?" Natsuki, catching up to him, asked as if she still couldn't believe it.

"Looks like it, assuming he keeps his promise. You think he will?"

"I think he will."

"I see," Yuichi said. "Sounds pretty good to me, then."

"But I also don't know what he'll do about the parts he didn't promise," she added.

"Well, that's true. Something else could still happen, but we'll deal with that when we come to it."

"Yes... but thank you for really coming to save me."

Yuichi blushed a little at her unusually honest reaction.

"Yuichi..." The woman he was carrying spoke up weakly. She seemed to have awakened.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Actually, you probably shouldn't talk right now. Your chest was badly hurt."

"I'm okay, this is n..." she trailed off in a cough, spattering blood onto Yuichi's shoulders. "I'm sorry, Yuichi. I'll die soon, okay?"

"Hey! It's okay! Don't die over that!" he shouted.

"Right. If you don't mind, then I won't mind." Her voice was remarkably clear for someone with a crushed lung, and she also seemed remarkably cheerful.

“Well, I mean, I do mind a little, but it’s okay...” Yuichi said. “Now, Takeuchi. What’s your connection to this person? Though I think I can figure it out...”

They seemed to be fellow serial killers, but he was hesitant to say that out loud.

“Aki Takizawa,” Natsuki said. “A former serial killer. She’s a type of recruitable monster, and since you converted her, she saved me.”

“Right,” he said. “I didn’t quite understand all of that, but if you saved Takeuchi, I’m grateful to you.”

He didn’t know how things had turned out that way, but if Natsuki said the woman had saved her, then as her club mate, Yuichi felt he should thank the woman.

“Yuichi... oh, I can die happy!” Aki said with ecstatic emotion.

“I told you not to die! I’m taking you to a friend’s hospital now!”

Yuichi was planning to take her to Noro General Hospital, where Aiko’s father worked. Since Aiko’s father knew him, he’d probably be flexible, and since the hospital was run by vampires, the fact that the patient was a sort of monster shouldn’t pose a problem.

“You know, the promise was that he’d let us leave this place safely, right? You don’t think he’ll attack us the minute we leave the room, do you?” Mutsuko asked as they arrived at the exit.

“That would be pretty sad. You think he’d do it?” Yuichi glanced back at the center of the room. Nergal was just standing there, and didn’t seem inclined to do anything at all.

“I don’t... think so. I think he has a sort of divine pride,” Natsuki said after a moment’s thought.

If Natsuki said it, it was probably true. She knew the man better than they did, after all.

While still keeping his attention focused on what was behind him, Yuichi left the room.

Nothing happened.

They walked a little further until they reached a staircase, which they ascended, and after climbing for a while, they arrived at a door. It opened into a boiler room with lots of exposed piping.

From this side, the door just looked like a wall, and once they closed it, there was no way to see how to open it again.

“It’s like a one-way door in a dungeon crawler!” Mutsuko cried.

“Are you sure it’s okay for us to be here?” Yuichi asked uneasily.

“What choice do we have?” she shot back. “There was no other way out!”

They seemed to be beneath a hotel.

Avoiding the eyes of the employees, they eventually made it to the lobby, where at last they could take a breather. But Aki was still badly injured, and Yuichi was covered in blood, and they had a cat with them. They wouldn’t be able to stay here for long.

Yuichi made a beeline for the exit, but then, from the exit, a familiar-looking boy appeared.

It was Hiromichi Rokuhara.

He’d seemed to have gone off on his own after parting ways with Nergal. What, then, could he be doing here? Just as Yuichi was wondering about that, his phone rang.

Yuichi set Aki down and answered the phone.

“Hey! Exactly where have you been?” the voice on the other end shouted. “You’ve been impossible to reach for hours! I went to the station and found nobody there! How dare you abandon me?!”

It was Chiharu. It was only natural that she hadn’t been able to reach them; their cell phones wouldn’t have had signal underground.

“Yeah, we were underground for a while,” said Yuichi. “What’s going on?”

“The resonance has started again!”

Resonance wouldn’t end until something was “settled.” It had stopped for a while after the priest had defeated the tengu.

“That explains it,” said Yuichi. “This guy’s a Divine Vessel host, right?”

Nergal had said that Hiromichi had a Divine Vessel.

Hiromichi approached.

“You’re not seriously intending to fight us here, are you?” Yuichi asked. They were in the lobby of a hotel with quite a few people inside. He didn’t know what kind of power Hiromichi had, but if they fought here, it could result in serious human casualties. “Did Nergal guide you here? I guess we did make it out safely, though...”

Maybe he’d thought it wouldn’t be an issue to come after them once they were on the surface.

Hiromichi walked up to Yuichi, and then — remaining outside

the boundaries of his personal space — swung a hand at him.

Yuichi didn't sense any threat in the motion. The trajectory of his hand would come nowhere near hitting him, so he didn't even have to dodge. He could tell Hiromichi wasn't hiding anything in his hand, and the movement didn't seem to be a feint to set up for another attack, either.

Thus, Yuichi ignored it.

Hiromichi's hand swept through the air in front of him. Suddenly, Yuichi felt dizzy, and was assailed by a powerful feeling of loss.

"Yu!" Mutsuko cried, perhaps surprised by Yuichi's moment of panic.

His vision went black for a moment, and when it returned, it was blurry and hard to focus. But even as he realized that Hiromichi must have done something, Yuichi's internal senses told him that nothing had changed.

A moment later his view stabilized, and Yuichi noticed that something was different. Something was strange.

Rather, it *wasn't* strange.

What had come before was strange, and now, it was normal. Those annoying labels that showed him people's roles in life were gone.

Hiromichi smirked.

In that moment, Yuichi realized what had happened.

Soul Reader was gone.

Epilogue: Sort of Like an Intermission

Ryoma sat, surrounded by books and bookshelves. He and his allies were all assembled in Ende's library.

It seemed the man really had taken it easy on them, because not one of them had turned out to be fatally injured. He'd called up some friends with healing techniques and gotten them all patched up, so they were all in prime condition again.

And now, things were extremely noisy. With a bunch of beautiful women Ryoma knew all together in one room, there was no way things wouldn't just devolve into chaos.

In the past, he'd been used to having multiple beautiful woman coming on to him and clinging to him, or pushing him away while secretly being happy about his presence. But this time, there were far more than there ever had been before.

A force of fifty of them were gathered together, fighting with each other over Ryoma.

What am I supposed to do? he wondered.

Despite knowing so many beautiful women, Ryoma wasn't especially good at dealing with them. All he could do was watch the chaos.

Ende arrived, the one who had effectively caused the situation, and the gazes of all present focused on her.

"I hear three is a crowd when it comes to girls, but this is just ridiculous," Ende commented. "I can't even enjoy my reading with all this noise."

"Reading, huh?" he muttered. "So that's where you were..."

"Well, connecting all these worldviews takes a lot of power, so let's send them away for a while."

At Ende's words, an abrupt silence fell on the library. Ryoma and Ende were the only ones left in the now-unnervingly-quiet space.

"Huh? What happened?" he asked.

"I just returned them to their worlds. Now, let's have a little talk."

“Fine,” he said. “What’s the subject?”

“The Divine Vessels War, of course. And how we’re going to win.”

“It should be easy with your power, right?” he asked. She could call all the powerful allies they needed. It was hard to imagine how anyone could stand a chance. He had lost to the Evil God itself, but the god wasn’t a participant, so he probably wouldn’t have to deal with him again.

“No, I think we’re still in a bad position,” said Ende. “Mainly because of you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You could have done more in the fight with the Evil God, couldn’t you? He was trying not to kill your allies. You figured that out halfway, right? So if you’d been willing to sacrifice one or two of them, attacking him along with them, the Evil God might have hesitated. Because he didn’t want to kill them, you know? He might have even done something careless to protect them.”

“There’s no way I could do that!” shouted Ryoma.

“You can,” Ende countered. “You can, and you must. The people you think of as your allies actually have nothing to do with your world. They’re basically characters in a book. You need to realize that it doesn’t matter if they get erased.”

“But…”

“Don’t worry,” Ende told him. “Characters in books never really go away. They’ll always still be there if you turn back to an earlier page. I really need you to start coming to grips with that. If you can’t, then nothing I do will help you.”

“I’m telling you, I can’t do that! I adventured with those people! I can’t sacrifice them!” he shouted.

“Hmm, I thought you’d say that, so I prepared a location for training.” With that, Ende suddenly disappeared.

“Huh?” Ryoma said.

“That’s a training room.” He could hear only Ende’s voice. “You can use it however you like. I’ve transferred a bit of my power to you, so you can summon your allies by reading the books around you.”

“Wait a minute! What am I supposed to do with all this?” he shouted.

“Soon enough, enemies will start appearing from the worlds I’ve prepared. If you defeat them, you can leave, but if you die, you

have to start it all over from the beginning. Don't worry; you'll get out eventually. Each time you die, you'll learn a little more. Take as many thousands of times as you need."

"Hey! Is that it?!" Ryoma shouted. But he was now alone in the world of books and bookshelves.

*****

"Hmm. I hope he can handle this..." Ende murmured.

She expected Ryoma to come out after about an hour of real time. She didn't know how many thousands of hours it would feel like to him, but she felt sure that he would be much stronger by then, at least.

"But the real question is whether it'll be enough to take out Yuichi Sakaki..."

Yuichi Sakaki really was trouble.

He had easily landed a hit on the same Evil God that had given Ryoma such trouble. She wondered, for a moment, what would have happened if they'd properly fought, and decided that Yuichi would have probably won. Mutsuko had been there, after all, and while Mutsuko was watching, there was no way that Yuichi could lose.

"That's the power of 'An Unforgiving World That Rewards Only Effort,' I guess," Ende murmured. That was her name for Mutsuko's worldview. Within that worldview, those who put in effort were rewarded, while those who relied on their god-given talent and power were helpless.

Most monsters were effortlessly strong. They had been born or created that way, so they never needed training.

Monsters were useless. They couldn't beat Yuichi Sakaki.

That was why she had decided that she needed Ryoma to put in some effort. Die, learn, try again. She was hoping he'd grow desperate soon enough.

"Well, setting that aside, I need a more fundamental countermeasure."

She didn't know if Ryoma's effort could put him on par with Yuichi. She just had to try it and see what happened. But while she was doing that, she needed another, more foolproof plan.

What could it be? Ende had an idea.

To separate Yuichi and Mutsuko.

To sever the tie between them.

Once that happened, Mutsuko's influence over Yuichi would be lost.

And Ende had the power to make that possible.

A change from one worldview to another.

She just had to use that on Yuichi, to tear Yuichi out of Mutsuko's world.

"The question is, how to fulfill the requirements to activate it..."

And so Ende began applying all her wits to do just that.

Afterword

Sorry for the wait, but here's volume 6.

I really am sorry to the people who were waiting. (You exist, right? I hope you exist!)

I made it to volume 5, but I wasn't expecting things to last this long. I owe it to the readers for getting me this far. Thank you so much, truly.

But once you get to volume 6, what do you write in the afterword? I'm starting to run out of things to write about.

Let's talk about my hobbies, I guess.

I'm not the kind of person to have specific set hobbies, but when I get free time, I do like playing video games.

Video games can be a huge time sink. Of course, it depends on the type of game, but recently, RPGs have been getting longer.

It's not bad if you just want to finish the story, but to unlock all of the content requires a huge time commitment. In the old days, I never got tired of killing the same enemies over and over and scrutinizing their drop items, but lately, I realized, I just can't enjoy that the way I used to. I guess it might be different if I lost my job and had nothing but free time, but that would be a sad situation in its own way.

Oh by the way, the time I realized that, I was playing *Xenoblade Chronicles X.* I finished the main story, but I couldn't make any progress through the side stories at all. It just felt like it would take so much time...

The next thing I want to play is *Fire Emblem Fates,* but to clear all three storylines seems like it would be such a time commitment, too...

That reminds me, a certain development near the end of volume 4 came from some research I did. It's a spoiler, so I won't go into detail, but I heard what it was like from someone who had experienced it, and I tried writing it that way.

Incidentally he ended up that way because he took a menghu yi pashan at full strength. It might be a little unbelievable, but it's

romantic, at least.

Incidentally, I'm writing in more different places now, but sometimes I feel a little hesitant to spend a lot of time in a cafe or a restaurant. I get worried that I'm monopolizing a table, and things like that. I could go to an internet cafe and pay some money to reserve a room and do whatever I want there, but there are too many distractions there. So I did a little searching around and found there's something called a "coworking space."

It's just a thousand yen to rent, whether you're there for just an hour or a whole day. You can plug in and use wireless internet, which seems very convenient. But it also seems like the kind of place for people who are very concerned about collaboration and communication and synergy, so I decided not to use it. I just want to do my work in silence...

Now for the acknowledgments.

I'm very sorry to my editor for making a lot of trouble once again. (It's convenient that I can use acknowledgments both for thanks and apologies.)

And to An2A, who did the illustrations, thanks for doing great illustrations once again. Tomomi's cheongsam is the best, and I'm glad Nihao the China gets to appear on the cover!

Well, see you next volume!

Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

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My Big Sister Lives in a Fantasy World: Humanity's Extinction Actually Happens This Time With the Evil God's Revival?!
by Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis
Edited by Emily Sorensen

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Original Japanese edition published in 2015 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2017 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: October 2017